DVD ROM **GIANT DEMO DVD INSIDE!**

MLB 06: THE SHOW

PLUS: MARC ECKO'S GETTING UP
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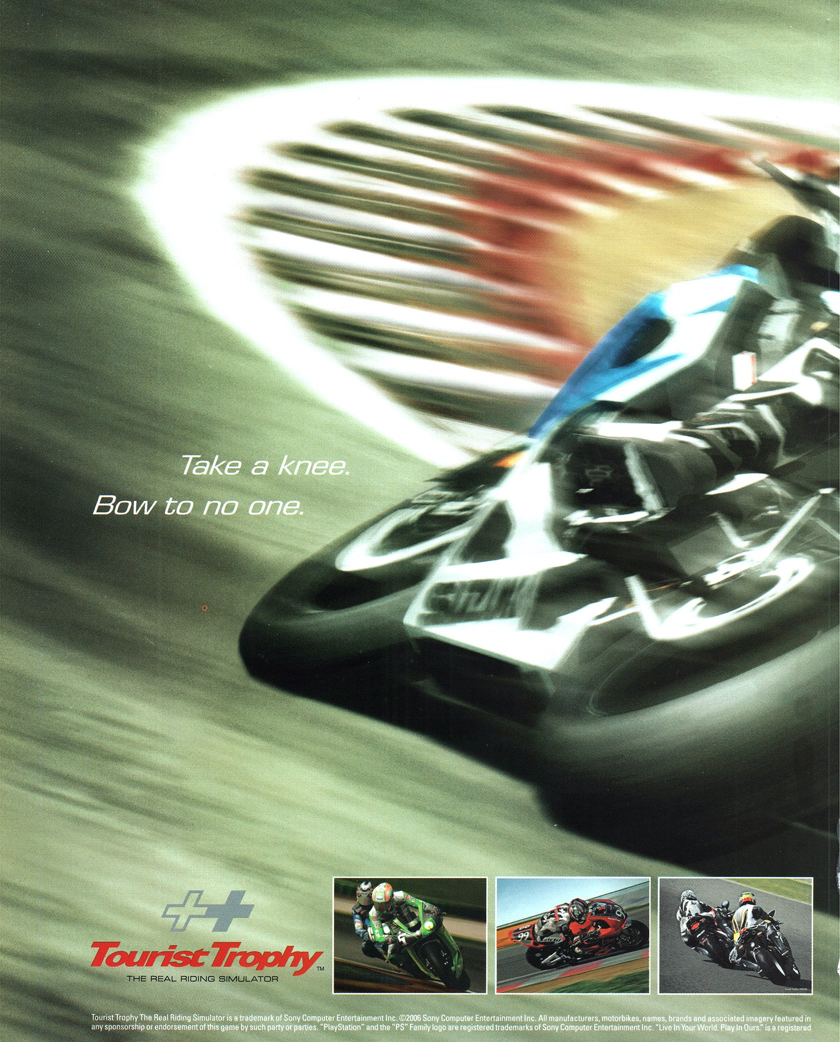
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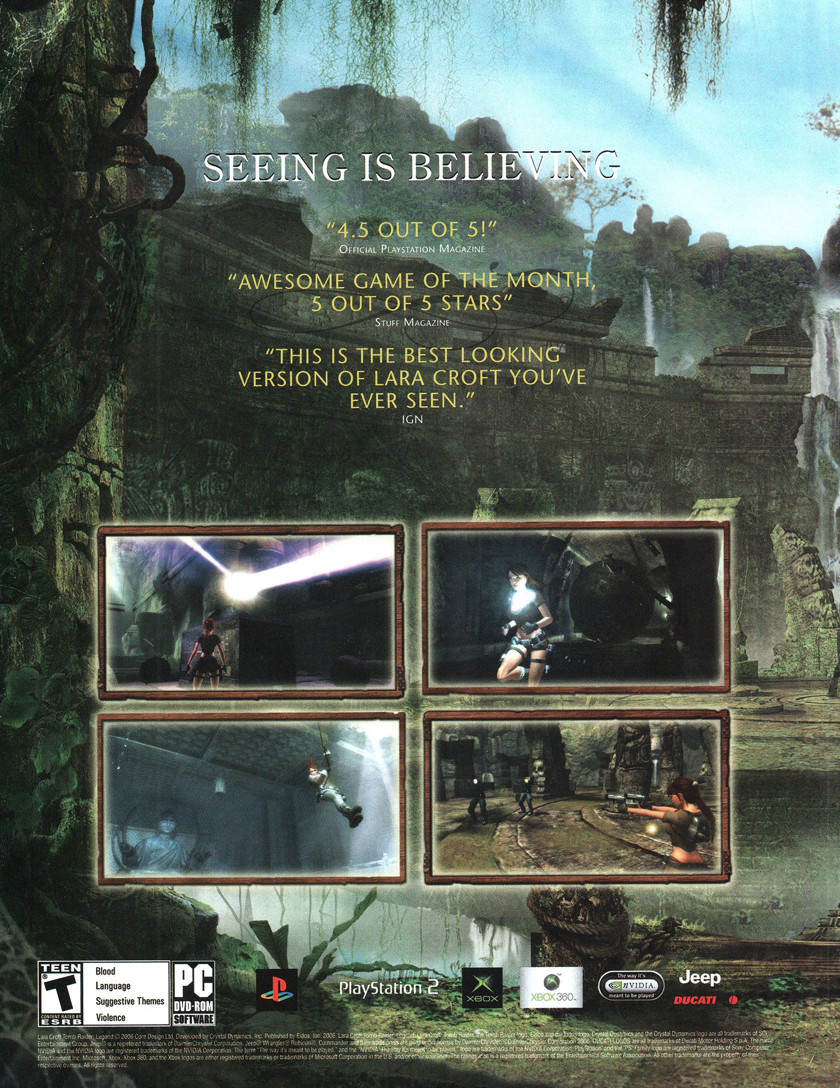

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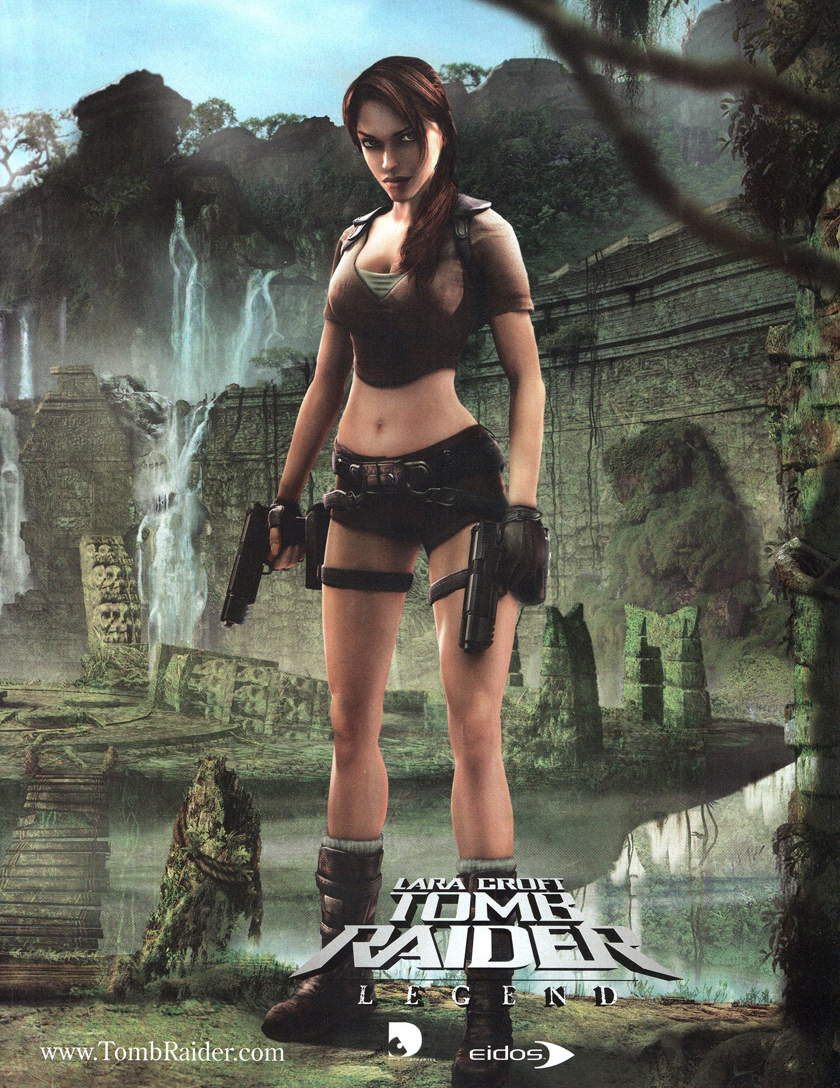
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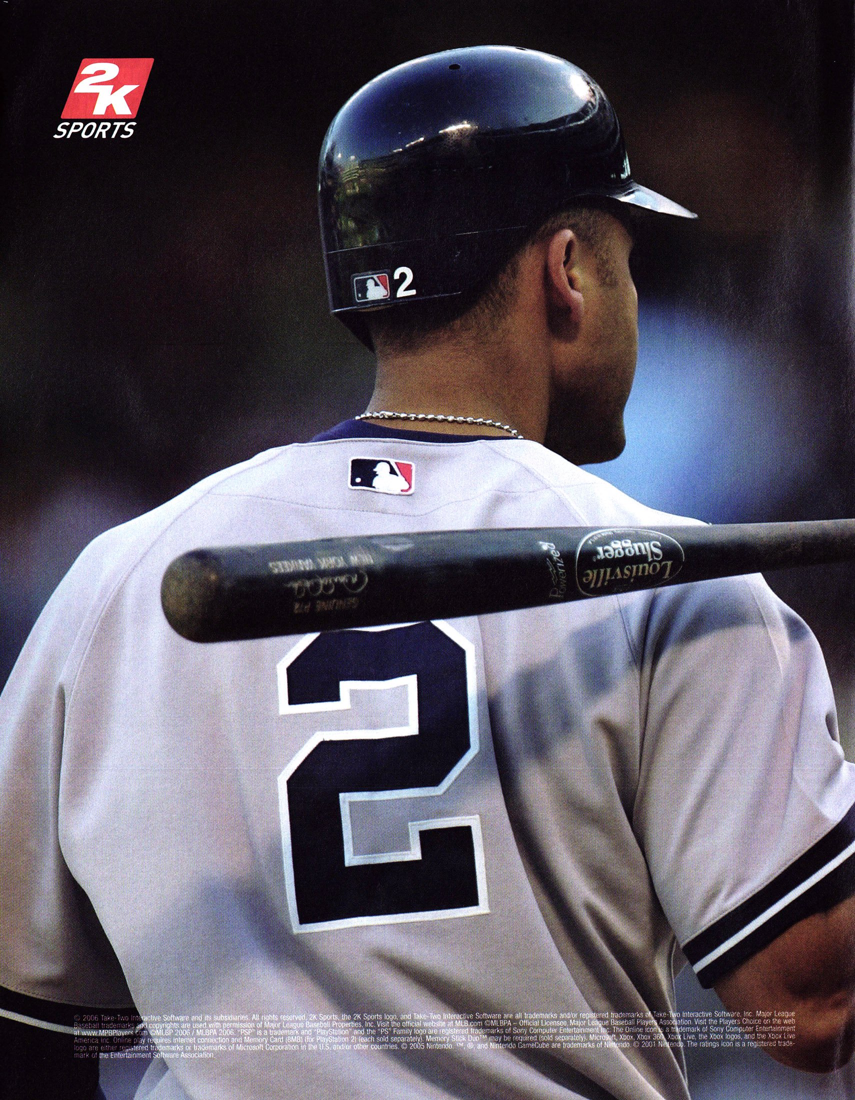

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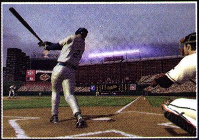

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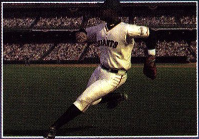

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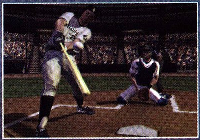

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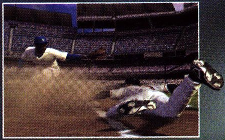

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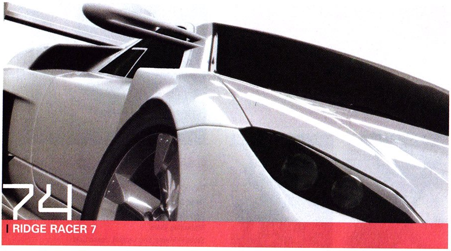
COVER STORY

105

PAGE 44

PS3 COMETH



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Take your PS1 games on the road.

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114 IN MY DAY
Does violence lead to violence?

GAMEVIDEOS.COM

Don't have a job in the gaming industry, the money for a plane ticket, or invitations to the parties? It doesn't matter—all you need to get to E3 is a connection to ye olde Interweb. There, on the brand-spanking-new GameVideos.com, you'll be able to see footage from the show floor, from the parties—it's like being there.

When you've satiated your eyes feasting on the delights of gaming's biggest event, take a break from seeing and just listen to the melodious voices of the *OPM* editors as we deconstruct everything (or is it nothing?) important about the industry on our brand-spanking-new podcast, RadiOPM.

And after you're done listening to what we have to say, let us know what you think by visiting our lovely blogs and heckling us for our made-for-radio appearances. Editors are standing by now.

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#105

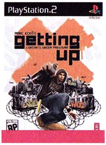
WELCOME TO OUR WORLD

One of the things we pride ourselves on is bringing you the latest and greatest demos the gaming world has to offer. That is one of the benefits of reading the *Official U.S. PlayStation Magazine*, which you are holding right here in your hands.

This month lets you become a rookie graf artist in Marc Ecko's opus to street culture or sample the sandbox-style gameplay of the RPG hit *Steambot Chronicles*. But that's not all; baseball season is well under way and we have included the demo for *MLB 06: The Show* to get you in the swing of things.

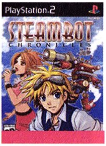
So, come on—what are you waiting for? Grab the disc and get to your PlayStation 2! Oh, and one last thing...can anyone find the hidden game?

PLAY IT!



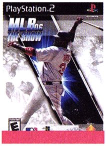
MARC ECKO'S GETTING UP: CONTENTS UNDER PRESSURE

Do what it takes to leave your graf upon the city of New Radius while dealing with rival gangs and avoiding the police.



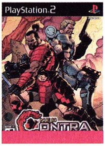
STEAMBOT CHRONICLES

Check out the demo of this cel-shaded mech action game, which is replete with whimsical atmosphere and a cool cartoony vibe.



MLB 06: THE SHOW

Sample what this game has to offer as the Houston Astros go against the Chicago White Sox. Will the White Sox live up to the title of World Champions? That's up to you.



OLD-SCHOOL REDUX

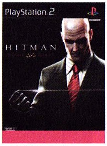
Find out what you missed the first time around as you sample old-school-style gameplay with a modern twist in this month's selection of Demo Classics.

?

???

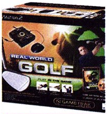
Hmmm, this month's disc seems to have a hidden demo. And we're not going to tell you where it is—the weight of the world is on your shoulders to find it.

WATCH IT!



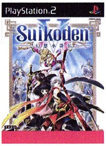
HITMAN: BLOOD MONEY

Still need convincing as to the brilliance of *Blood Money*? Here's another look at what it takes to be the world's greatest assassin.



REAL WORLD GOLF

This game promises all the realism and subtlety of real golf right in your living room—except you won't have to walk. See if it delivers by watching this video.



SUIKODEN V

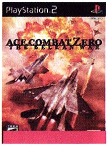
Take a lengthy look at this thoroughly enjoyable role-playing spectacle and sample the compelling story found within. Come on, you know you want to.

WATCH IT!

FIRST FLOOR BASEMENT, HERE I COME.

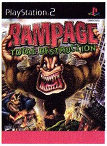
METAL GEAR SOLID DIGITAL COMIC

Check out this übercool interactive comic book from creator Hideo Kojima and producer Noriaki Okamura. These guys rock.



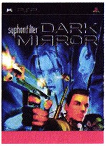
ACE COMBAT ZERO: THE BELKAN WAR

Go behind the scenes and sample some of the intense dogfights that make up the bulk of the action in this latest *Ace Combat* game.



RAMPAGE: TOTAL DESTRUCTION

It's been 20 years since the original *Rampage* became an arcade classic. And now there's another new version—check it out right here.



SYPHON FILTER: DARK MIRROR

Both Joe and Logan agree that this is the best third-person shooter to grace the PSP so far. Take an in-depth look for yourself.

PLAYSTATION UNDERGROUND TEAM

Demo Disc Producers
Gary Barth, Cori Lucas, Manuel Sousa, Chris Tan
Marketing Team
Steve Williams, Eric Lempel, Jesse Caid
Executive Producer
Andrew House
QA
Sam Bradley, Edward Toomy
Account Coordinator
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3D Artists Jason Robinson, Philip Williamson, David Hayes
President Katherine Williams
Technical Director Tim Edwards

SPECIAL THANKS
Maimoona Block, Kirsten Costello, Christine DeNezza, Tom Gillan, Gerald Martin, Sean Thomas, Jim Williams

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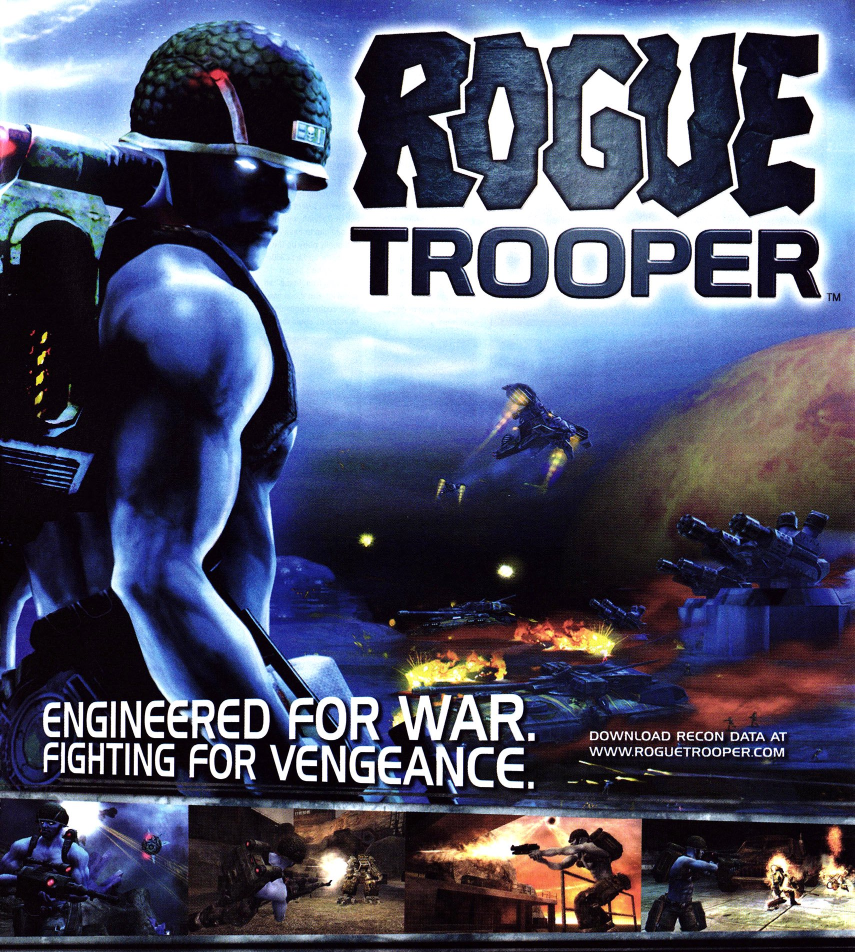

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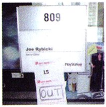
THE OPM FAMILY

TOM BYRON

spent a rollicking St. Patrick's Day in Dublin, where he drank Guinness and regaled all of Ireland with his tales of bountiful riches in a little place called America. Sure'n Tom's trip to his native land was fun, but the trip he's really looking forward to is the one to Los Angeles for the big E3 festivities, where he'll finally get hands-on time with the PS3. While he waits, he'll continue to play *Monster Hunter: Freedom*, secretly obsess over *Oblivion*, and be awed at this issue's PS3-games feature.

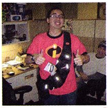
DANA JONGEWAARD

is alarmed by the recent outbreak of parenthood on *OPM*, especially since the rest of the coworkers on the floor keep speculating who will be next and then glancing her way. She's doing her best to dispel any rumors.



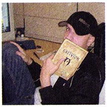
JOE RYBICKI

finally succumbed to the sweet, sweet siren call of *Oblivion*, which caused him to cave and finally pony up the money for an Xbox 360. Suddenly he's begun "working from home" an awful lot. But those two facts couldn't possibly be related...could they?



THIERRY NGUYEN

is so psyched about *Mercenaries 2* that he ordered a baby bandolier diaper bag to make himself look rugged. After donning said bag, he quipped, "If a bandolier is good enough for Chewie, then it's good enough for me and my kid."

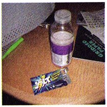


GIANCARLO VARANINI

Spent almost an hour listening to Europe's "Final Countdown," which crosses off item No. 384 on the list of 1,000 things he wants to do before he dies. Next up? Deep sea fishing with the ghost of Ernest Hemingway!

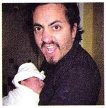
LOGAN PARR

has discovered new life in his PlayStation Portable as he's been playing titles such as *Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror* and *Daxter*. Now if only he can figure who the little grey alien is that is communicating with him through the PSP's network options....



RYAN VULK

needed something to bolster his art directing drive when fellow art minion Alejandro took time off for his kid. To this end, Ryan has concocted something he calls "Liquid Rage"—a mix of Vitamin Water, Red Bull, Jolt gum, and a burst of ephedrine.



ALEJANDRO CHAVETTA

realized that in all of his classes regarding fatherhood, they never said you couldn't eat the baby or instruct him or her in the ways of the vampire. If there was ever a convincing argument for educational reform, this is it, folks.

EXTENDED FAMILY

JAMES MIELKE

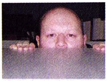
shares with the world his disturbingly extensive knowledge of Japan's bizarro world of pop culture in his debut as the writer of J-Town. We're a-scared. No, really.
milkman.1UP.com

GREG FORD

is the reviews editor for *OPM*'s sister magazine, *Electronic Gaming Monthly*. He also recently discovered that girls do not like eating outside or riding in paddleboats.
egm_ford.1UP.com

ROBERT ASHLEY

comes from Texas, where they grow their game reviewers tall and snarky. He also makes music in not one, but two different bands. He's multifunctional like that.
robertashley.1UP.com



GREG SEWART

hails from the same country cold comes from: Canada. He worked for *OPM*'s sister mag, *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, for years before joining, and then leaving, the game-design community.
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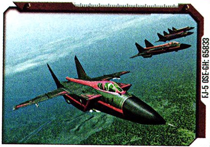

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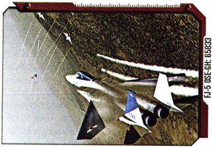

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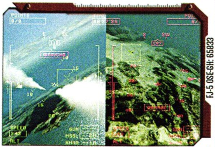

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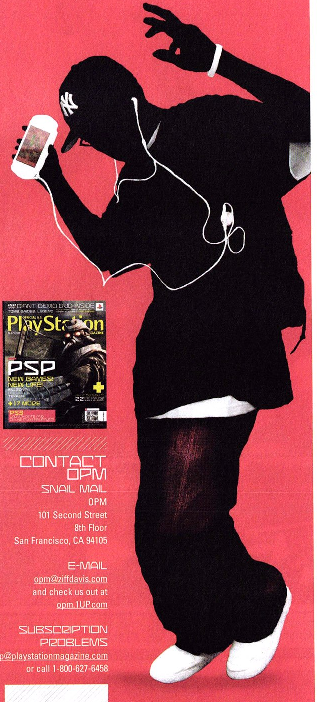
INPUT

THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE...OR WHATEVER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LETTER OF THE MONTH

WE WEREN'T CRAZY FOR THE KRATOS

Love the magazine. I just thought I'd show some love with a couple of pieces I did: my Kratos drawing and my iPsp ad (that's me holding it). Yeah, that's right: idon't iPod, iPsp.

Jaime Marrero
Via e-mail

THERE WAS A PLAYSTATION 2?

Why are we so excited for the PlayStation 3? Yes, the graphics are better; yes, the games are going to push the limits; and yes, it will have a profound effect on the future of gaming. Oh, and yes, I am looking forward to it.

But I feel the need to remind everyone of another game system that has tested the limits of imagination and creativity. What is this marvelous device? Odds are you already have it: the PlayStation 2. That little machine has more blockbuster smashes on it than Peter Jackson's portfolio, and they're still coming. 2006 is the year for PlayStation gamers. We get a reformed Lara Croft, a work of art in *Okami*, a legendary, yet long-delayed, game in *Final Fantasy XII*, *Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistence*, and of course my personal favorite, *Kingdom Hearts II*. Wow.

If none of those games impressed you, go for the oldies. Essentially every one of the *Jak and Daxter* games has been good, same with *Ratchet & Clank* and *Sly Cooper*. If you dislike Sony's three mascots, then take a look into the *Dark Cloud* games, or maybe the cult classic *Sphinx and the Cursed Mummy*. If you love RPGs, then definitely go for *Final Fantasy X* and *Shadow Hearts*. Like classic titles? Then you'd be happy with *Midway Arcade Treasures*, *Sonic Mega Collection Plus*, and *Mega Man Anniversary Collection*. *Star Wars* nut? *Star Wars Battlefront II* and *Lego Star Wars*. Love something violent? *God of War*, *Black*, and *GTA: San Andreas*. Still not happy? Then make your own game with one of the several *RPG Maker*s or *Graffiti Kingdom*.

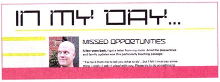
My point: Everyone's so excited about what's coming they forget what's already here.

The Dark Wolf
Fan of *OPM*
Gamer of PlayStation
Via e-mail

HERE'S JOHNNY!

I really enjoyed seeing John Davison coming back to write for the magazine. I was just flipping through the April 2006 [*OPM* #103] issue, and I noticed his picture on an article talking about his predictions about the PlayStation 3. I've been a regular reader of your magazine, and I still like the new members, but it's nice to see some old friends come back. Thank you for continuing a great magazine.

CJ Coffey, Seymour TN



MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

A few years back, I got a letter from my mom. Amid the pleasantries and family updates was this particularly touching passage:

"Far be it from me to tell you what to do"...but I felt I must say something. I wish—I ask—I plead with you. Please try to do something to

TO JOE

I read your story entitled "Missed Opportunities" [P.S., *OPM* #104, May 2006], and it struck close to home for me.

My mom was recently diagnosed with an inoperable form of cancer. She probably has about a year to live. Although my mother is still alive today, I think daily about what I could have done better as a son or how I could help make sure she knows she was the best mother a boy could ask for. I know that day is approaching, and your letter really did help me realize there are some really small things that will make a lot of difference. The type of difference that will make sure she knows everything was OK on her final day. I'm not sure I would have ever thought just answering a small request from a long time ago would make any difference today, or even on that day, but your column definitely showed me a bit of that light.

Joe, I don't think you really disrespected your mom. You did what we all can easily do, and that is to take for granted that our parents are there at all. Keeping in touch is simple, but really knowing they are there and really knowing what they have done for us as children *and* adults is really the hard part. We aren't here forever, and anyone going through what you've gone through or what I'm going through will really understand that truth.

I'm not sure my response to your mom's request is going to be what she wanted, but you both deserve a response. And, hell no, you can't disobey Mom!

Videogames cause violence in those that are predisposed to violent behavior. Those of us on a more even keel play a game and then walk away. [Antivideogame attorney] Jack Thompson is a perfect example of videogames causing violence. This man turns into a frothing, raving lunatic at the mere mention of videogames. He becomes incoherent, wild-eyed, and seems to [regress] into a state similar to that of a juvenile caveman. Jack is predisposed to violent behavior and is therefore more affected by videogames. On an interesting note, he does gain litigation superpowers once in this state. However, he doesn't seem to know how to effectively use them yet. I'm guessing we will be in real danger if he can pull himself out of his perpetual "payback" state.

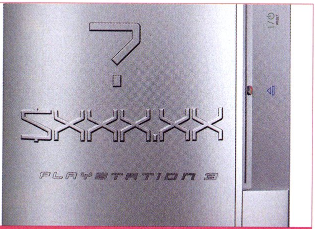
On a more serious note, we can't deny the mental impact of video games on some people. We've all seen that guy that goes crazy because things aren't going his way, screaming at the TV or monitor and generally becoming someone you would rather videotape and expose on the Internet than actually play a game with. However, this happens to a very small minority of the gamers in the world, and these people will probably react that way to almost anything not going their way.

Your mother has a valid point in the fact it *can* influence people in a negative way. However, that point is usually made to overthrow the actual fact that it rarely does. As a matter of fact, some games have been proven to be very therapeutic. If we were to go on the basis that something *can* affect you, then we would have nothing left in the world to do or even enjoy.

The real kicker is when people say videogames are training people to be killers or terrorists. If that's the case, I'm probably a kick-ass surgeon, sword fighter, race-car driver, magician, field commander, spy, and pilot. And that's just to name a few of my videogame-induced talents.

Thanks for the wake-up letter.

J.G.
Via e-mail



GAMERS ARE TALKING ABOUT

THE GREAT PS3 PRICE DEBATE

By the time you read this, Sony will have revealed what the PS3 is going to cost. But those inquisitive stalwarts of the *OPM* message boards couldn't resist answering the question posed by Sonyfan405, "How much would you pay for the PS3?"

allGT4 makes with the funny before getting real: "Well I have $2.30 on me right now, so . . . $400."

Anaris82 strikes a wait-and-see pose: "If they drop Blu-ray (the next Betamax) and price it at around $250, I'll consider buying one."

FinalFantasyRuler88 thinks way back: "Well, when my PS2 was bought, it was about $650 Canadian, and that's about what I think I'll be shelling out again."

To which bargain-hunter **Anaris82** quickly fires back: "You got ripped!"

The ever-practical **ChickenNext** checks in: "I'm not even buying a PS3. At least not at launch. When the price will at least be reasonable, and by that I mean $250, I'll buy one."

Botkiller patiently agrees: "$300. Which means I probably won't be getting one for a year or two after it comes out. Which is fine, because around the time it drops to that price should hopefully be around the time *MGS4* comes out."

The skeptical **ohJTBehaaave** needs convincing: "I can see the PS3 being priced between $500 and $600 dollars with this Blu-ray stuff. Without the games, which are never there anyway at launch, I'll be holding off on getting a PS3 if the price is as high as the rumors say it will be. Like Bot said, no reason to cough up the $$$ until games like *MGS* start to hit shelves. That's when I'll start to think about coughing up the big bucks."

OOPS!

LEGEND CORRECTION

On the DVD sleeve in the May 2006 issue (#104), *Tomb Raider: Legend* was incorrectly identified as developed by Pyro Studios. The correct developer is Crystal Dynamics. *OPM* regrets the error.

1UP.com

BLOG OF THE MONTH

It's Shameless Self-Promotion Month—again—here at *OPM*, in which we take the opportunity to remind you that each of the staff has his/her own blog on 1UP. Here they are—be sure to visit them all.

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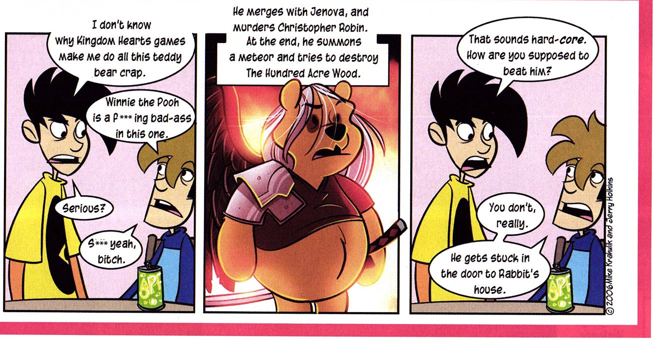
CLUB OF THE MONTH

It's a site for Sora's eyes. LOL. Actually, like the page intro says, "This is a Club 4 *Kingdom Hearts* fanatix alike!" We like! soraskingdom-club.1up.com

PENNY ARCADE

PENNY-ARCADE.COM


I don't know why Kingdom Hearts games make me do all this teddy bear crap.
Winnie the Pooh is a f***ing bad-ass in this one.
Serious?
S*** yeah, bitch.
He merges with Jenova, and murders Christopher Robin. At the end, he summons a meteor and tries to destroy The Hundred Acre Wood.
That sounds hard-core. How are you supposed to beat him?
You don't, really.
He gets stuck in the door to Rabbit's house.
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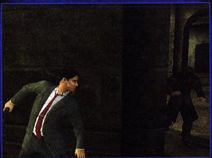

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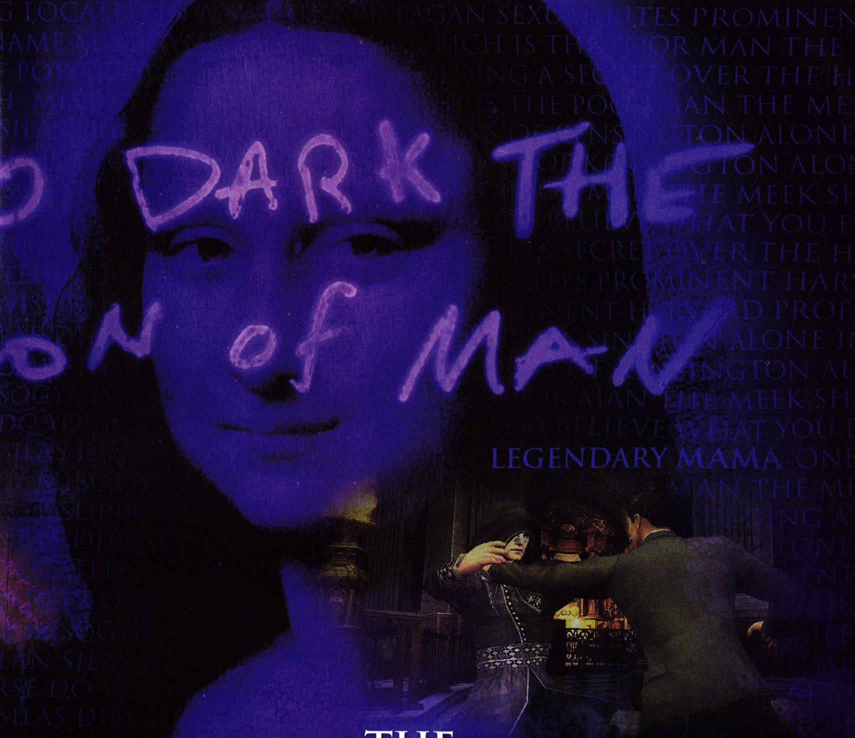
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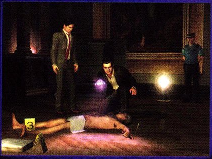

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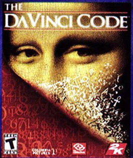
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Keep up to date on...everything.

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Hands-on promise that it's the best *FF* yet.

TILL

AT SOE,

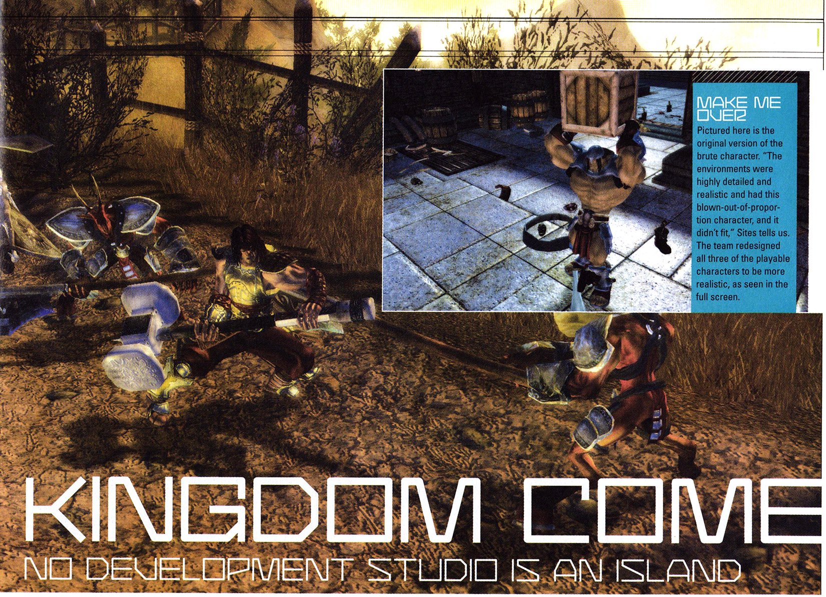
When *Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom* was first shown publicly, there seemed to be a consensus on two main points. The first was, "Cool, a hack-n-slash for launch"; the second, "It doesn't *look* very next-gen."

So how does early input affect a game's development? We visited the Sony Online Entertainment offices to check out the team's progress on *Dark Kingdom*. The team was in the middle of getting code ready for E3; the plan was to have a portion of the game playable on the show floor—and supposedly PS3 controllers to play it with, although when we visited, that wasn't absolutely certain yet.

Andy Sites, *Dark Kingdom*'s producer, starts giving a tour of the game in its current state. A shinier version of the brute is running around in a village onscreen, tackling the skeletons in his way. "Initially, we wanted to follow the tradition of what *UL* had, with very blown-out-of-proportion, cartoony characters," Sites explains. "Our first character, the brute, was this big, burly guy with arms longer than his legs—he was like 8 feet by 8 feet square."

The character version he's referring to is the one that was shown in the screenshots that accompanied the exclusive game announcement in *OPM*'s April issue (#103). Sites continues, "We got the brute into the game, and the first thing we realized was that he clashed. So the marketing guys put together a focus test where they went through all the characters and all the concepts, and they gave us the initial reactions of what people thought. Based on that and on our gut instincts, we ended up doing a reset on all three of the characters."

So was the game shown too early? When asked, Sites says, "Showing when we did may have been a little premature considering the early state of the game. However, I feel that the feedback we received will ultimately allow us to make a better game, and in the end, delivering a great game is all that matters."



KINGDOM COME

NO DEVELOPMENT STUDIO IS AN ISLAND

MAKE ME OVER

Pictured here is the original version of the brute character. "The environments were highly detailed and realistic and had this blown-out-of-proportion character, and it didn't fit," Sites tells us. The team redesigned all three of the playable characters to be more realistic, as seen in the full screen.

The team dropped the new character just the week prior to this visit, so right now they're working on getting him back to his prior action moves in time for the show. Senior creative director Rich Waters explains, "The timing on it is a little unfortunate. When we changed the main character up—visually, it was the right thing to do—but we *had* him fully functional. He had all his combos, all his attack moves. And we've got this guy now who looks great, but it's a process of building him back up."

Art director Bill Yeatts adds, "I think more people are expecting more realistic-looking graphics in the next generation. At least for the first pass. Giving people what they expect is really important for a launch title. After all, we don't want to be *Fantavision* on the PS2, selling 5,000 copies."

The challenge for any PS3 development team at this stage is not knowing exactly what to expect. Since Sony has remained mum on so many aspects of the PS3, other publishers and developers have followed suit. Which means that little else is public that can be used for comparative purposes.

Waters muses, "It's really interesting to think about. We're wondering how other teams are doing that are shooting for launch titles, because right now we don't have anything to directly compare to. It feels like we're doing pretty good, but we'll see."

IMAGINING THE POSSIBILITIES

One of the things that the SOE developers are most excited about is the opportunity that the built-in features of the PS3 offer. Sites says, "Now that broadband capabilities are on board and they've announced [that it will have] a hard drive—those two things are typically expensive upgrades that most console players don't want to think about having to purchase."

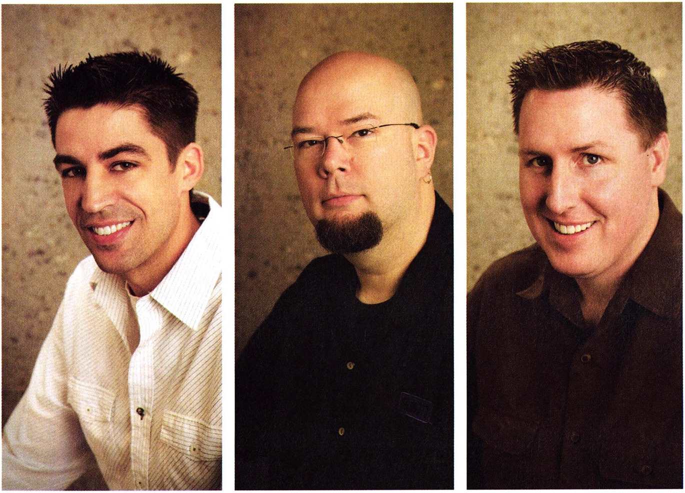
Yeatts adds, "It will be very interesting to see if follows the trend of Xbox—broadband only or whatever it will be. On the PS2, it was very challenging to have the ISP and set up your modem. I'm interested to see how it goes through this time around for getting online.

"We'll find out, I guess," he laughs.

"At retail, there will only be three characters. Time plays a role in development, and you want to get each character fine-tuned," Sites explains. "It's more than just a visual change, and that's probably the main reason we kept it to three. Our plans are to offer additional gameplay elements after launch that you either have to purchase online or acquire online in some way. And you'd have to download those, which would obviously take advantage of the hard drive. We're planning on having things that are available from when you purchase the game and first pop it into the machine."

> "IF THE HARD DRIVE COMES STANDARD ON IT, THAT'S THE BIGGEST THING FOR US."

It's not known yet what these downloadable extras will cost—Sites says that much of it could depend on Sony and what sort of price cap the company may put on items available online. One of the main concerns is whether the hard drive comes built in to the console. "If the hard drive comes standard on it, that's the biggest thing for us. If you have a space to store the content, we could technically put anything on there that you can acquire on the Blu-ray disc."



From left to right: producer Andy Sites, senior creative director Rich Waters, and art director Bill Yeatts

That "anything" could even extend to entire levels. And if the PS3 comes with a built-in hard drive, then anyone with a PS3 could take advantage of this. Yeatts even floated the possibility that an exclusive level could be created and then distributed via the *OPM* demo disc—pop it into the console, transfer the level over to the hard drive, and just like that, your game has gotten bigger.

Of course, online will be about more than distributing extra content—the team plans to have plenty of online modes as well. You'll be able to play the game cooperatively or competitively with up to four players; they're also checking into the feasibility of providing modes like deathmatch, which could allow for additional players to keep it interesting.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

A lot of the challenge in making a first-generation game comes down to figuring out the hardware, which means that it's a constant balancing act in trying not to attempt more than is possible at the start. Waters says, "We tried to make a game that's simple in what it's trying to do, but where every element fits together well and offers something, as opposed to trying [for something] too big. This type of game on a console is a little new to this development team, so we wanted to make sure we got the basics right."

Yeatts chimes in, "Most of the failed products I've ever worked on [failed] because you're trying to do something above and beyond what you're capable of doing. *Gran Turismo* was the sixth racing title those guys had made, and that's why *Gran Turismo* is really good. I think that for us, going into doing this style of game, there were a few pills we had to swallow. We're making a hack-n-slash game—we're not making a fighting game or any other genre—but we don't want to make *Untold Legends 3*. So for us, it's pushing it visually and adding some little tricks—physics-based puzzles and changing up the combat. We're slanting toward next-gen-ness, but we're not reinventing the wheel.

"Typically, with every [console] generation, it's the second and third generation [of games] where you actually start to exploit the hardware," he continues. "It's sort of like discovering hieroglyphics and then looking for the Rosetta Stone. We all know how to do stuff, but we have to figure out a way to get it on the [dev kit]."

They're also doing their research. Sites says, "We've been playing lots of 360 games—purely from a visual standpoint, that's the low bar that we have to set, because by the time the [PS3] launches, people will have been seeing these games for a year. There's going to be a level of expectation that we're going to have to exceed. So games like *Kameo*—that's probably the closest to the level we're shooting for, but we've also been playing *Ghost Recon* and *Project Gotham Racing 3* and *Oblivion*."

"We've had a lot of 'oh, these next-gen consoles can do everything,' but the reality is that they are the *next* generation—this isn't the PlayStation 9 commercial," says Yeatts. "The biggest challenge is trying to make something visually next-gen that works with the hardware. We've had three versions of dev kits that have successively gotten more powerful. So we're finally narrowing in on what we can and can't do."

> "WE'RE MAKING A HACK-N-SLASH GAME—WE'RE NOT MAKING A FIGHTING GAME."

"I think we're going to find that the tools improve, too," adds Waters. "For all this stuff, we're making new tools that work with PlayStation 3. The first time is spent figuring out how we want to apply things. And for the second product we do, we'll have all that stuff there as foundation."

Yeatts concurs, "The better the tools, the more you benefit. Especially if you can keep the same people [from game to game]. It's like a rock band. If you have the same bass player the whole time, then he can pick up on when the singer wants to take a break, and start doing a bass line or whatever. It's the same with us—"

Someone interjects, "Basically, he's saying we're like rock stars."

Yeatts smiles. "Really, *really* geeky rock stars."

SONY & SONY

What's the difference between SOE and SCEA?

While all PlayStation hardware and much of the software falls under the umbrella of Sony Computer Entertainment, Sony Online Entertainment is actually part of the Sony Pictures portion of the Sony family.

The SOE division was born back in 1998 when Sony Online Ventures merged into Sony Pictures. Around the same time, 989 Studios, which used to develop for PC as well as for console, was refocused as a PlayStation-only development house. The computer game and online development portion was spun off into a company called RedEye Interactive, which was later renamed Verant; in 2000, SOE acquired Verant.

Since the announcement in March that SOE would be hosting online servers for PlayStation 3 games, Sony CEA has purchased a stake in Sony Online, so the two are now more closely connected than before.

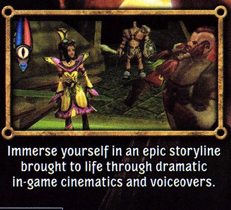
STUDIO RÉSUMÉ

EverQuest (1999)
PlanetSide (2003)
Star Wars Galaxies (2003)
EverQuest Online Adventures (2003)
EverQuest II (2004)
Untold Legends: Brotherhood of the Blade (2005)
Untold Legends: The Warrior's Code (2006)

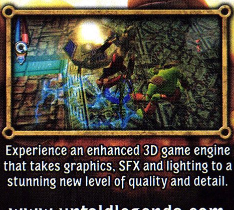
Ephotique

What Dark Beast Lurks Within You?

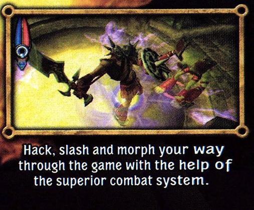
The SEQUEL to the
#1 ACTION RPG
on the PSP™ system*
UNTOLD LEGENDS™
THE
WARRIOR'S CODE™



Immerse yourself in an epic storyline brought to life through dramatic in-game cinematics and voiceovers.



Experience an enhanced 3D game engine that takes graphics, SFX and lighting to a stunning new level of quality and detail.



Hack, slash and morph your way through the game with the help of the superior combat system.

www.untoldlegends.com

TEEN
T
Animated Blood
Fantasy Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org
Game experience may change during online play.

PSP™
PlayStation Portable

SOE
SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT

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PlayStation 2
Ski Jumping Pairs
- Reloaded -
- スキージャンプ・ペア リローデッド -
祝ゲーム化

OLYMPIC GLORY

We thought it was a little odd that Hard Gay would be found in a game featuring ski jumping pairs, but after looking at the cover art and knowing his style of humor—it's not so odd anymore.

J-TOWN

HARD UP FOR JAPAN

In a land where trends and fads rise and fall faster than pachinko balls, the leather-clad phenomenon known as "Hard Gay," aka "Hado Gei," aka "H.G.," aka "Razor Ramon," (no relation to the WWE wrestler of the same name), aka "Laser Ramon," has shown an impressive level of—forgive the pun—staying power. Hovering around six feet tall and possessed of a wrestler's musculature, H.G., as he is most commonly known, is a comedian who originally came to fame by "saving" various failing businesses in Japan, like mom and pop ramen shops, by soliciting customers to come in and try his ramen, all while wearing tight leather shorts, a leather vest, old-school oversized biker sunglasses, and leather biker caps. Think Judas Priest, plus much pelvic thrusting, times Japanese, divided by Ricky Martin's "Livin' la Vida Loca," and that's basically it. His shtick revolves around shouting a few choice catchphrases like, "Domo Hado Gei desu!" ("Hello, it's Hard Gay!") while thrusting his pelvis rather vigorously in the direction of his subjects, often small children (who, incidentally, adore and imitate him). Another oft-repeated exclamation is, "Wa-fuuuuuuuu!" (He once infiltrated Yahoo's Japanese offices, accusing them of stealing his signature line.) Hysterically, his line, "Sei sei sei sei seiiiii!" is usually followed by his hand shoved in someone's face. Hard Gay is practically ubiquitous on every weekly Japanese comedy show, aiming his ass at the camera and rallying people everywhere to thrust their pelvises in rhythm with him. He'll photocopy his face for you or give you a sensual ass massage. He'll even show you how to bump and grind if the mood takes him.

The result? Hard Gay fever has swept Japan, and H.G. has inspired books, a long line of H.G. merchandise, and even a CD/DVD combo of his reinterpretation of the Village People standard "Y.M.C.A." (renamed "Young Man"). Ironically, Hard Gay is most probably not actually gay, as it is merely his stage act, and since he also recently became engaged (but then again, Elton John was once married). Still, that hasn't stopped H.G. from appearing in videogames everywhere, either as his H.G. persona or as a close approximation thereof. An homage to Hard Gay famously appeared on the Internet in a pelvic dynamo, as some inspired fan created "Hard Gay Man" in *Rakugaki Oukoku* (also known as *Graffiti Kingdom* in the U.S.). H.G. made an official appearance as a character in the Torino 2006 edition of the PS2 game *Ski Jumping Pairs*, a videogame version of the notorious CG-rendered (think *Toy Story*, but stupid) ski jumping comedy shorts. Hard Gay has become so ingrained in popular culture in Japan that he's hardly shocking or outrageous anymore, a point underscored by the fact that his image is being used to sell everything from videogame consoles to food. Imagine something like this flying in North America! Didn't think so. A fighting game on another console even has an avatar that resembles H.G. for gamers to download and use, but we can't remember the name (yeah right!).

> HARD GAY'S IMAGE IS BEING USED TO SELL EVERYTHING FROM VIDEOGAMES TO FOOD.

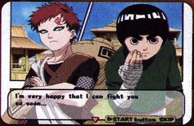
SHONEN JUMP'S

NARUTO™

ULTIMATE NINJA™

3
HAKU
98
SASUKE
3

Increase your chakra and unleash multi-level super attacks to ascend the ranks and become a full-fledged ninja.



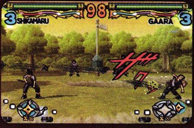
I'm very happy that I can fight you so soon...

START button SKIP

Fight as one of over 12 playable characters to complete missions and unlock tons of bonus content.

3
NEJI
96
SHIKAMARU
3

Switch between 12 interactive stages mid-combat while performing powerful ninjutsu moves as seen in the hit television series.


3
SHIKAMARU
98
GAARA
3

Use a variety of weapons, close combat or call on support characters to assist with super attacks or drop off power-ups.

PlayStation 2
SHONEN JUMP'S
NARUTO
ULTIMATE NINJA
RATING PENDING
RP
BANDAI NAMCO Games

DO YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO BECOME THE ULTIMATE NINJA?

SHONEN JUMP

Cyber Connect 2
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RATING PENDING
RP
CONTENT RATED BY
ESRB

Visit www.esrb.org for updated rating information.

PlayStation 2

viz media™

BANDAI NAMCO Games™

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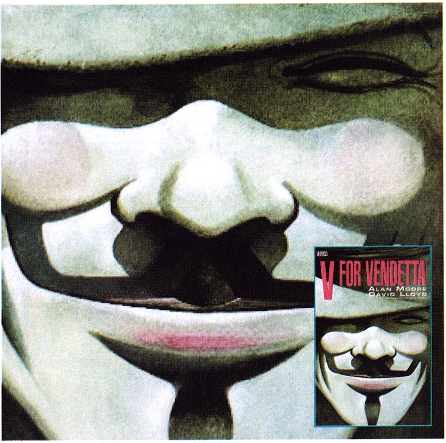
pause WHEN YOU'RE NOT PLAYING GAMES

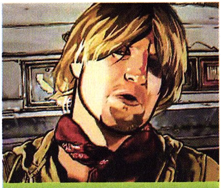
SEE



V FOR VENDETTA

dccomics.com

If you want a good example of "adaptation" versus "duplication," then snag yourself a copy of the original *V for Vendetta* graphic novel. There are some significant differences between the movie and the book, so it doesn't feel very redundant to check out both. Even though the book was written in the '80s as a protest against Thatcherism, its themes of anarchy versus fascism, the power of iconic symbols, and the need for people to rally against an unjust government, as well as its overall story construction mark it as one of the best graphic novels ever published.

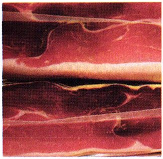


A SCANNER DARKLY

scannerdarklymovie.com

Director Richard Linklater first tried out the live animation technique in *Waking Life*, but it's his second try that really shines. It's a near-future Southern California where 20 percent of Americans (including recent recruit Keanu Reeves) have been ordered to spy on the rest of the population. *A Scanner Darkly* (based on the novel by sci-fi genius Philip K. Dick) isn't due in theaters until summer, but we've been watching the trailer over and over just to see the cool graphics. One thing we've learned: We knew there was a reason we didn't want to live in Orange County.

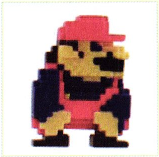
FEEL



HAM

tienda.com

Or more specifically *jamón ibérico*, which is the king of cured meats and has just been approved for import to the U.S. Made only in Spain, *jamón ibérico* comes from free-range Iberian hogs that roam the countryside and are fed up to 20 pounds of acorns per day—for two years. It ain't cheap to keep hogs around that long, so it's no wonder that a ham can cost $800 and up. But with a flavor that nutty and sweet and perfect, it's worth every single penny.

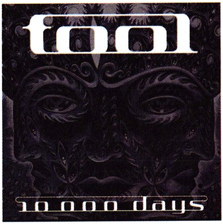


MAGNETS

kidrobot.com

Grocery lists. Family photos. A printout from the Internet of that three-legged dog wearing an eye patch. Your refrigerator surface can be a receptacle for a lot of things, but you need some way to attach all that really awesome stuff. Which is where these cool Mario magnets come in. For only $3 each, you can have these perfectly pixelated reminders of your youth right there in your kitchen all the time. Oh, mamma mia! Lucky!

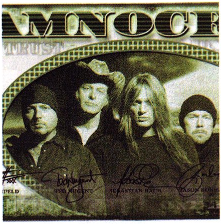
LISTEN



10,000 DAYS

toolband.com

We half-expected Tool's next album to be called *Annelidous* and feature songs about how Drake's Equation can heal the broken soul. But by golly, it actually has a normal-sounding name and normal track titles like "Wings for Marie" and "The Pot." No matter—it's been five years since we got any new songs out of them, and we look forward to long tracks with weird vocals, dense lyrics, and crazy sound dynamics, as should be expected of any Tool release.



DAMNOCRACY

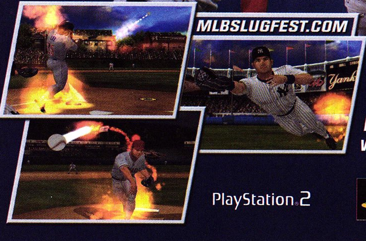
sebastianbach.com

Supergroups are always cool, but when you combine alumni from Skid Row (Sebastian Bach), Anthrax (Scott Ian), Foreigner (Jason Bonham), and Biohazard (Evan Seinfeld) with everyone's favorite gun activist Ted Nugent, you know that the room is going to rock hard-f***ing-core. To check out the group's sound for yourself, watch them on VH1's new reality show, *SuperGroup*. Start practicing your headbanging, because the premiere is scheduled for May 18.

ONLY $19.99 *US MSRP

Forget the Gloves.
This is SlugFest!

MLB
SLUGFEST
2006
Mets
45
PUJOLS
5
25
RED SOX
WILLIS
35
GUERRERO
27



The most aggressive brand of baseball is back! Heat up the diamond with tape measure homeruns, circus catches, hard-tags, spikes high slides or toe the rubber and let loose some chin music. All of this PLUS, for the first time ever in SlugFest, create your very own Sluggers and Flame Throwing Pitchers.

PlayStation 2

XBOX

MIDWAY

EVERYONE 10+
E 10+
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Crude Humor
Lyrics
Violence

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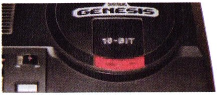
THE PRICE IS RIGHT

WILL THE PS3 BREAK THE BANK?

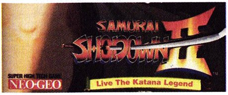
Aside from comments made by Sony Computer Entertainment president Ken Kutaragi alluding to a potentially high price tag, we don't really know how much the PlayStation 3 will cost at launch—and we probably won't know until at least the start of E3. But, if videogame history has taught us anything, it's that a console usually needs to be within a certain price point for consumers to rush out and by it in droves—usually, in the $299-to-$199 range. Yet, with all of the high-end technology within the PS3, there's speculation that its base price could be far higher than that. So, how much is too much? We compare system launch prices of yore and then use an inflation calculator to see how much they would be in 2006 dollars.

Atari 2600
(1977)
Units Sold: **25 million plus**
Launch Price: **$199**
Cost in 2006 Dollars: **$645.75**

Nintendo Entertainment System
(1985)
Units Sold: **60 million plus**
Launch Price: **$299**
Cost in 2006 Dollars: **$530.62**



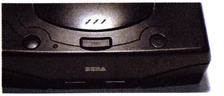
Sega Genesis
(1989)
Units Sold: **35 million plus**
Launch Price: **$199**
Cost in 2006 Dollars: **$310.19**



SNK NeoGeo
(1990)
Units Sold: **Not Available**
Launch Price: **$649.99**
Cost in 2006 Dollars: **$966.76**

Panasonic
R·E·A·L

3DO
(1993)
Units Sold: **Under 1 million**
Launch Price: **$699.95**
Cost in 2006 Dollars: **$920.23**



Sega Saturn
(1995)
Units Sold: **10 million plus**
Launch Price: **$399**
Cost in 2006 Dollars: **$496.42**

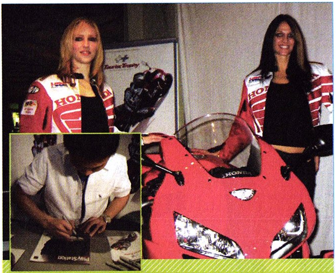
SONY
SELECT
START
ANALOG

Sony PlayStation
(1995)
Units Sold: **100 million plus**
Launch Price: **$299**
Cost in 2006 Dollars: **$372.01**

PLAYSTATION BITS

BYTE-SIZED NEWS

Looks like there's some trouble brewing for **UMD movies**. Universal has expressed major disappointment in sales of its movies in the format; on top of that, Wal-Mart is considering plans to drop the format altogether from its shelves. Sony couldn't be reached for official comment on that matter.... In other news, the PSP's own ***Ratchet & Clank*** game is looking great and will have four-player multiplayer options when it ships in 2007.... Sony recently **dropped the price** of the PS2 from $149.99 to $129.99. Analysts with Lazard Capital Markets say that the move was made in order to compete with the Xbox 360 and the looming PS3 launch.... Elsewhere, yet another valuable videogame study has been conducted—published in *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*—that says **playing games results in drug use**, unprotected sex, alcohol use, and violence. They also think it contributes to the stealing of candy from babies and the kicking of puppies.



TOURING SAN FRANCISCO

GRAN TURISMO CREATOR GREETS FANS IN THE U.S.

The president of Polyphony Digital and creator of the *Gran Turismo* series, Kazunori Yamauchi, took time out of his busy schedule to celebrate the release of motorcycle sim *Tourist Trophy* in North America at Sony's Metreon in downtown San Francisco. The public event featured autograph signings from members of the development team, including Yamauchi. There was also a 64-person *Tourist Trophy* tournament, with the champion winning a custom helmet. Check back next month for a full interview with Yamauchi to hear what he thinks about his recently released game.

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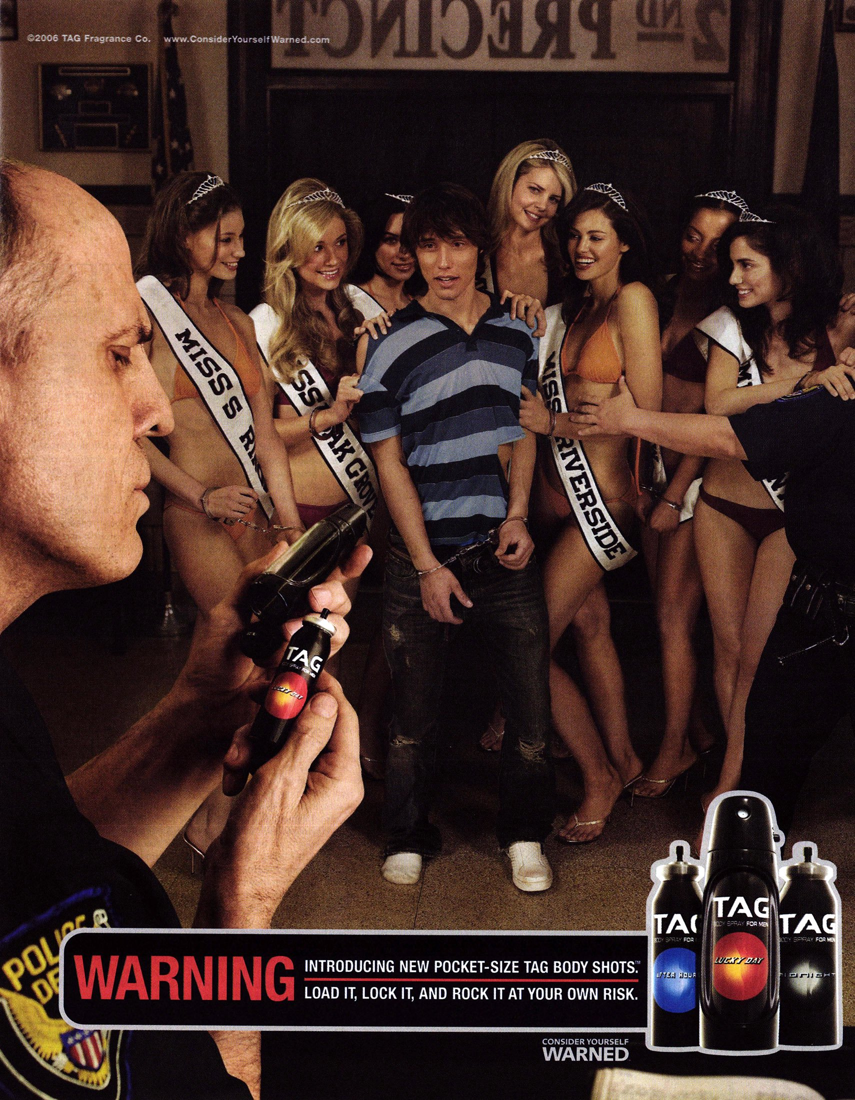
2ND PRECINCT
MISS S RI
SS OAK GROV
MISS RIVERSIDE
TAG BODY SPRAY FOR MEN
LUCKY DAY
POLICE DE
WARNING
INTRODUCING NEW POCKET-SIZE TAG BODY SHOTS.™
LOAD IT, LOCK IT, AND ROCK IT AT YOUR OWN RISK.
TAG BODY SPRAY FOR MEN AFTER HOURS
TAG BODY SPRAY FOR MEN LUCKY DAY
TAG BODY SPRAY FOR MEN MIDNIGHT
CONSIDER YOURSELF WARNED.

THE BIG PICTURE

BY JOHN DAVISON

JOHN DAVISON is "El Honcho Gigante" of the Ziff Davis Game Group, and he likes to play games that involve battle mages and the stealing of paint brushes. Tell him what you think at opm@ziffdavis.com.

MICROTRANSACTIONS: THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Want a superfast car for your next-generation racing game? Drop a dollar or two and you'll be able to download something magnificent. Want a powerful new sword? An enormous gun? Enchanted armor? Bigger muscles? Better stats? All of this will be possible on the new PlayStation Network, if publishers and developers want to offer it, and if you have the cash for it.

The prospect of adding functionality and gameplay to a single-player experience is something that's been dangled in front of us for years now. Sony's Phil Harrison has been raving about episodic content and downloadable goodies as part of the core videogame experience since the last generation shift. It's an easy sell: Take a game you love and keep adding to it in little pieces. You can't lose, right?

What we're starting to see on both the PC (particularly in the MMO space) and the Xbox 360, though, is that these game-enhancing microtransactions have the potential to pick apart previously perfectly balanced games. While it's great to add a new area to an RPG or a new chapter to a story, things change dramatically when online gameplay is factored into the mix.

> IT'S AN EASY SELL: TAKE A GAME YOU LOVE AND KEEP ADDING TO IT IN LITTLE PIECES.

If gamers can buff their stats by simply dropping some coin on a downloadable extra, what does this mean for the game as a whole? Should players with purchased goodies be allowed to participate with good, honest, old-fashioned grinders? If you want to stay competitive, do publishers essentially have the power now to practically *force* you to spend extra money on a game you already own? If a new gun becomes available for *Killzone 2*, but Sony charges $2 for it, how will it be controlled in ranked games? Will owners have an unfair advantage? Or will they be locked out of games with people with a standard setup?

We've heard for years now that *Gran Turismo* will eventually support online play and offer a vast and ever-expanding database of downloadable cars—"every car ever made," to paraphrase series creator Kazunori Yamauchi. If we have to *pay* for these cars, either individually or in downloadable "sets," how will this affect the online gameplay? Will "exotic" cars be priced on a scale in accordance with their real-world worth? Will a Pagani Zonda cost more than a Subaru STi? Will online races and tournaments have to be locked into specific make-based series, like they are in real life? Is this fair? It's entirely possible that there will be a form of elitism within individual games' cultures dictated by real-world money. If you can't afford to participate, there's the potential for you to never see a certain part of the game, simply because you don't have the cash for it. Don't we play videogames to get away from this kind of stuff?

For the time being, we need to have faith that publishers will do the right thing and keep things fair and balanced. It seems unlikely that there will be specific "rules" for the PlayStation Network, so everything will be tweaked on a game-by-game basis.

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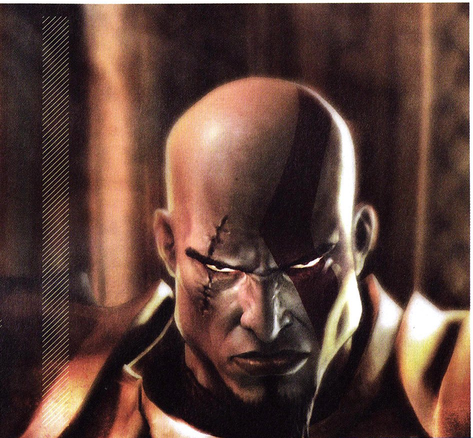
TRENDSPOTTER

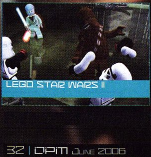
THE LAST GREAT PLAYSTATION 2 GAMES!

Since E3 will be dominated mostly by next-generation content, we wanted to take some time to acknowledge the fact that the PlayStation 2 isn't quite on life support yet. In fact, some pretty good stuff is coming—and even more is still unannounced. So fear not, PlayStation 2 owners. You are not forgotten.



GOD OF WAR 2

FINAL FANTASY XII



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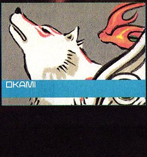

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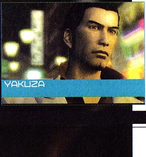

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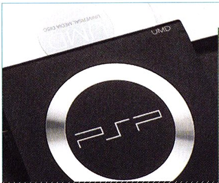
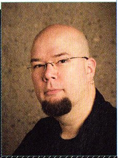




WHAT'S IN YOUR PSP?

IT DOES MORE THAN PLAY GAMES

RICH WATERS

Senior creative director at Sony Online Entertainment, currently working on *Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom*

GAMES

Right now, I'm playing *Daxter* on my PSP. I'm a big fan of Naughty Dog's games and had a lot of fun with the *Jak and Daxter* series on the [PlayStation 2]—plus, it's hard to go wrong when the main character is a smack-talking orange rodent.

MOVIES

I only have a few movies on UMD, and I grabbed *Napoleon Dynamite* to watch the last time I took a trip. I'd seen it before, but it was cool watching it on a PSP.

MUSIC

Aquemini by Outkast is the album that's playing right now.

WEB

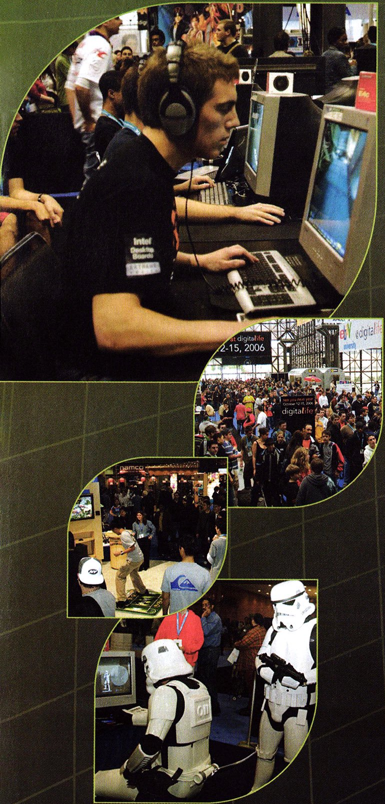
I don't do a lot of Web browsing on my PSP—the last site I checked out was GameRankings.com. It's great for keeping up on the latest game reviews or looking up an older game I might have missed.

GAME ENVY

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION

Yes, we already had *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* for the Xbox 360 and the PC once before in Game Envy. But the game is so damn good, we just *have* to reiterate how much we'd like to see it—or something like it—on the PlayStation 3. The team at Bethesda has done an incredible job in building a believable, living, breathing world that's genuinely affected by how you perform in the game—just sit in a bar and listen to visitors speak of your exploits, or waltz through the city streets and hear the townspeople talk of your arrival. But the best part is the quest system, which has some of the best pacing we've seen in a Western RPG; there's an excellent balance of intense action followed by laid-back exploration. Not to mention the fact that the game looks amazing. It feels almost like every tree and every mushroom was placed with the utmost care in constructing the world.

Don't let the competition beat you at your own game



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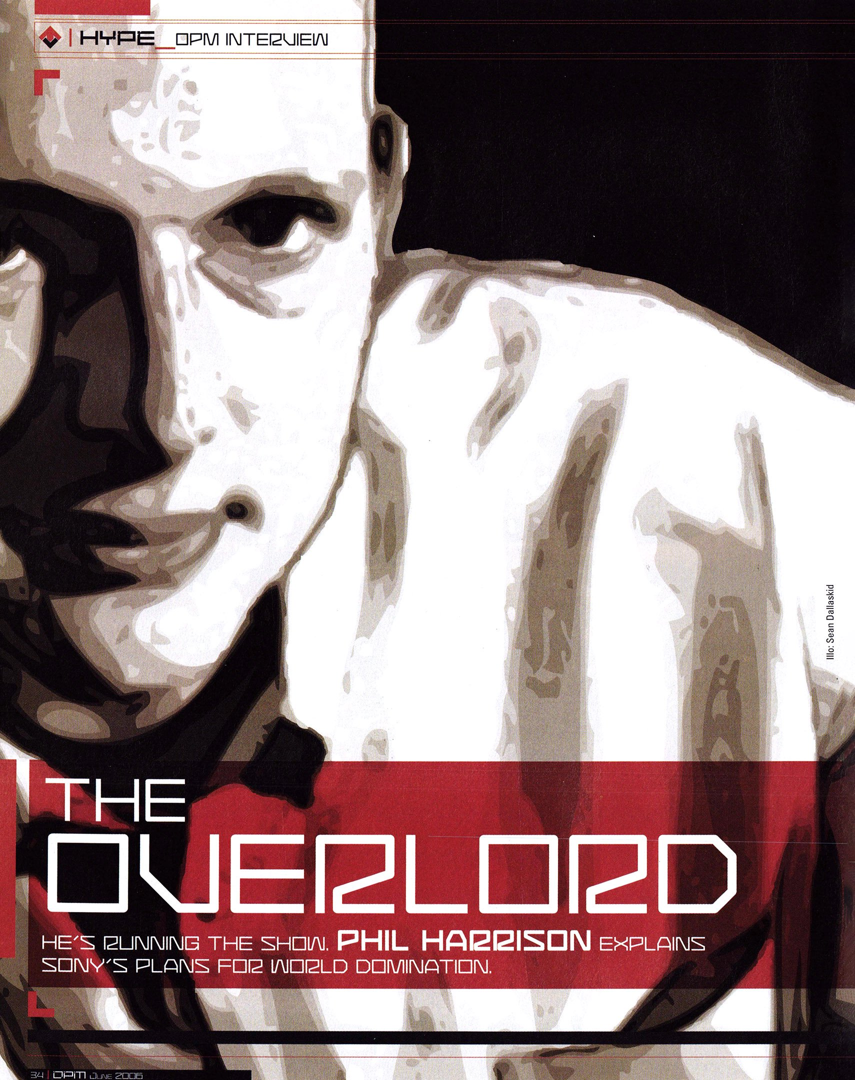

Illo: Sean Dallaskid

THE OVERLORD

HE'S RUNNING THE SHOW. **PHIL HARRISON** EXPLAINS SONY'S PLANS FOR WORLD DOMINATION.

It's only fitting that the president of Sony Worldwide Studios is an incredibly tall man. His height gives him the ability to see far and wide—and, in his position, he sees plenty. Not only is he in charge of ramping up first-party development for the PlayStation 3, but he's also been designated the front man for the PS3's online service, as well as the main cheerleader for the PS3 hard drive and many of its other features. We had a chance to chat with him shortly after the Game Developers Conference to discuss the PlayStation 3 and what Sony is going through in the days leading up to E3.

OPM Let's start out with your GDC keynote and the details of the PlayStation 3 online service. Is this sort of an acknowledgement that both the structure and the method for providing online play for the PS2 aren't really viable anymore?

PHIL HARRISON No, it's more taking on the fact that the PlayStation 3 is designed from the ground up as a network platform, whereas the PlayStation 2 wasn't. The PlayStation 3 is, both in terms of hardware design and operating-system design—and also, its position as a broadband device, a writeable device—being established from the get-go whereas, as you well know, the PS2 was not. There was a hole in the back of it, but that was a consumer upgrade. But also, more fundamentally, the world has shifted since 2000. Broadband is much more accepted. It's no longer a bleeding-edge technology. It's not science fiction; it's kind of consumer fact. And there are a lot of trends that are happening around us that we can just take hold of now that we weren't able to on the PS2.

OPM One of the trends is downloadable content, of which you mentioned smaller games—but will it also eventually include bigger PS3 games?

PH Yeah, I think that the PlayStation 2 has proven our ability, unequivocally, to deliver good multiplayer gaming experiences on individual titles, vertically integrated within the title, but without any of the benefits of single sign-on or all the community benefits that we talk about. What we now have with the PlayStation 3 is not just multiplayer gaming, but the community features, the communication features, and then, as you just mentioned, the content features. And that, to me, is the most interesting bit, because it's where the revenue is going to get extended for games; the involvement in games is going to get extended beyond the retail purchase. You buy the Blu-ray disc with whatever content that represents, and then additional purchases are going to download, directly to the user, extra content. There's no reason why you couldn't have a full game downloaded as well, and—as I said at GDC—full executables can be booted and run from the hard-disk drive and also on the PSP from the memory stick. And these are big innovations; I think the industry is still kind of getting their heads around what they mean.

OPM Everyone knows that the budgets for PlayStation 3 games are pretty large. Are you promoting the microtransaction element as a way for developers and publishers to make up the money that they would likely lose on developing a big-budget game for the PlayStation 3?

PH I don't think it's as clear-cut as that. I don't think just because it's going to cost $20 million to make a shooter, that by charging 50 cents for guns, you're going to make up the shortfall. I don't think it's quite that simple. But by extending the revenue stream beyond the retail purchase, you can have an involvement with the consumer, with the player, that will yield further commercial benefits—now, that's kind of business-school bulls**t. What I mean is, today, when you buy a game, that's the publisher's last involvement in the life of that disc. You know, when you develop a game, and you deliver it to retail, and you wave goodbye to it, and it goes off into the ether—other than it maybe being traded a couple of times at GameStop—you never, ever see it again.

What we're moving toward on the PlayStation 3, and I think we'll actually get to it very quickly, is [that] game developers will start a relationship with their audience the day the game ships. And that relationship will be commercial—downloading and selling stuff—it will be community, and it will be creative. And that feedback loop, I think, has a positive impact on the way games are designed.

I was very inspired by talking to the guys who wrote the script for the *24* TV show. I was really shocked by this: I thought there would be like a grand master plan, like they sit down and write the whole season, all 24 episodes, and then film it, and then edit it. No, no, no, no—they do it in three batches. They don't even know what's going to happen in batch two and batch three when they start filming batch one.

But what it allows them to do, even after they've started broadcasting the first episodes, is that they're looking at the forums, they're looking at the newsgroups, they're looking at the community on the Web, and they're saying, "You know what? That character's really resonating with our audience. Let's write him up in the later episodes," or "You know what? That's definitely not working; we need to shift the emphasis of this character." Or, to a certain degree, they can reflect real-world events in the script, although it's not quite so obvious as sociopolitical commentary—but you can get to that kind of feedback loop. When games can do that, I think our medium just becomes much more impactful. Political satire is something that videogames don't do very well, but I don't see any reason why we shouldn't be able to do that.

OPM So, along those lines, how much control will Sony have over the final say in what—

PH Everybody asks me this question! *[Laughs]*

OPM The problem is that everyone imagines Sony's online service as being an Xbox Live–type service, where Microsoft has a lot of control over what gets presented. People assume that Sony's in a similar position. But with the fact that developers can add their own servers to the PS3 network, it isn't quite the same thing.

PH I suppose you could think of it in a linear way: On one side, you've got Microsoft or AOL, with their "walled garden" approach. And on the other extreme, you've got Google or the open Internet, with uncontrolled, unregulated access to all. And where do we sit on that continuum? Well, it's definitely more the [Google] way than the [Microsoft] way. Having said that, we will obviously obey and be governed by ratings organizations, whether [they regulate] films or games, depending on the content, all around the world. And we need to be sensitive to the privacy protections of players. All those things that you'd expect will clearly be maintained. But, beyond that, I want innovation to be proven by experimenting with new games. You know, shelf space is infinite online. There are no restrictions. There are no practical impediments to putting anything up there. I think that's great for our players, that they can get experiences that they wouldn't get only at retail. [Online] is not going to replace retail, but it enriches the experience, it grows the market, and I think everybody wins.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

What would be a better killer app for the PlayStation 3 than *World of WarCraft*? Blizzard expressed that it wouldn't bring *WOW* to the 360 because of its server structure, but the PlayStation 3 server structure would allow Blizzard to control its own servers. The official word from Blizzard is that they are keeping their sights focused on PC development, but with this server structure, we can hope.

> "WE WOULD LOVE TO HAVE BLIZZARD WORK WITH THE PLAYSTATION 3."

OPM This sort of semiopen structure, was that designed specifically to court developers that are wary of the closed network that Xbox Live has? Like Blizzard, for example, said that they specifically wouldn't do *World of WarCraft* for Xbox Live because they don't have any control over the server. So was it done to appeal to them?

PH I wouldn't draw a specific comparison with Blizzard. I'm not the third-party guy anymore; I'm the first-party guy. But, corporately, we would love to have Blizzard work with the PlayStation 3. I think that'd be great for them, and I think it'd be great for our audience as well. But that's just my personal opinion. Our motivation is to not have just the game companies that we know today, but also the media companies and content companies that are going to be formed tomorrow. You know, the music companies that will be online-only, the film companies, the television stations that are going to be digital-IP broadcasting. This is the future of entertainment, and we want to embrace all of that—without restrictions—down the board.

TIRED OF THIS YET?

E3 will reveal all... well, at least most of it, anyway. Like the rest of you, we're tired of seeing all the same technology-demo shots and the same pictures of the system. Harrison promises that we'll be seeing much more at the show—and that we'll finally be getting most of the details that everyone has been asking for.

OPM So, is it a universal interface for the Sony network?
PH Try, if you can, to extract standards and sign-ons from graphical user interface. They may be different things, but the underlying systems will be common. So the commerce engine will be common. The single sign-on will allow access to our products—even though, when you get into a proprietary MMO server, there may be subsequent registration that you have to do, but we want to make it very simple to sign on for everybody.

OPM You mentioned at GDC—and [PlayStation creator] Ken Kutaragi mentioned this as well—that developers are being encouraged to use the hard drive. But we were told this will be determined on a regional basis, so what will actually happen if the hard drive isn't included in particular markets? Is it going to be a segmented market?
PH I can only speak about our own products, from Worldwide Studios' point of view, that every game we develop will feature hard-drive support. We're looking to create leading-edge examples of what the network platform can do, from launch onward, in as many of those "wheel of fortune" spokes as we can. Obviously, not all of them will be from day one, but we will have very compelling examples and experience for gamers from launch.

OPM You brought up the "wheel of fortune." How important are Sony Pictures, Sony Music, and the other branches of the company going to be in making this all work well?
PH Well, let me use a very current example—a major motion picture from Sony Pictures that would be great to make available for digital download in a secure way first on the PlayStation 3. That, strategically, makes a lot of sense to me. In the same way that artists in the music world would want to associate with themselves with PlayStation 3, that would be good for their promotion or exposure and commercial interests as well.

OPM We've heard that the other branches are notoriously difficult to work with, or that there are communication issues. Has that been a problem so far?
PH Certainly not. Sony Pictures/MGM, combined, represent about 50 percent of the color movies ever shot. They are fully committed to Blu-ray and are absolutely a leading proponent of Blu-ray. If you have any questions about their dedication, go speak to Ben Feingold, the head of Sony Pictures Home Entertainment. I think he wears a Blu-ray T-shirt to bed at night. You know, there's no question of his commitment to that format.

One of the things that people often mistake, when you look at Sony from the outside, you think homogenous, S-O-N-Y, big company. Surely, all these people can sort all this stuff out. You know, questions like: "E3 party: Why isn't it Sony artists playing at the E3 party? Why is it that they record for Warner Bros.?" Well, the simple reason is that a record company doesn't own the band. You know, the band [members aren't] employees. They don't sit in their dormitory waiting to be called up. You know, "Guys, we've got to get ready! Get your sneakers on!" *[Laughs]* It doesn't work that way.

And so, it's the same with motion pictures. You know, the alliances of creators, financiers, directors, and talent that have to get together in order to make a movie. The ownership is going to be quite fragmented, and it's just the way the movie industry works, and it's the way the music industry works. We're kind of unusual in our business in that, you know, we own *God of War*. You know, Kratos is ours. If we want Kratos to be on the side of 10 million Pepsi bottles, he'll be on the side of 10 million Pepsi bottles. Whether or not that's a good creative example, I don't know. [*God of War* director David] Jaffe will probably kill me for even suggesting it! *[Laughs]* But you take my point: We don't have to go to his agent, his business manager, or fly him first class in order to take him to the shoot.

> "EVERY GAME WE DEVELOP WILL FEATURE HARD-DRIVE SUPPORT."

OPM There's a question of how ready these games will be when launch time comes. How in-depth will they be? Will they really be taking advantage of the PlayStation 3 hardware?
PH I was on a highway to nothing at GDC. There was no way I could do it right. If I walked on and showed nothing, you would've killed me. If I walked on and showed games that were clearly not finished, I would be criticized for it. So, it's like, I'm damned if I do, I'm damned if I don't. No disrespect to you guys, but the audience at GDC was the game developers, not the media. And everybody in the game-development community knows that launch is November, as you all know, and that E3 is really the key event for communicating what's going on with the games. The *Resistance* demo was actually created for an internal meeting in December, and that code hasn't changed since December—because if I had taken them off what they're doing for E3 to create a new demo just for GDC, we would have suffered at E3. You know, you've seen systems launched for years. You know the process we go through. The first things are not as good as what we have closer to launch or the games we have one year, two years out.

TOO EARLY TO SHOW?

Though Harrison says that much of what was shown at GDC came from demos that were months old, some of the new demos—such as the one of the *Ratchet & Clank* universe—looked absolutely spectacular, and they only make us crave more PlayStation 3 imagery than ever before. Be sure to check out more PlayStation 3 goodies, starting on page 44.

SOME PEOPLE WILL WANT A PIECE OF YOUR IDENTITY,
CHANGING IT TO FIT WHAT THEY THINK YOU SHOULD BE,
AND OTHERS WILL WANT A PIECE OF YOUR TIME, WASTING
IT WITH STUFF LIKE GETTING DRUNK AND GETTING HIGH
AND THEN ANOTHER PIECE AND ANOTHER PIECE AND...
IF EVERYONE TAKES A PIECE OF YOU, WHAT'S LEFT OF YOU?

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And I always just bring people back to remember what you thought when you saw *Ridge Racer* on the original PlayStation compared to what you thought when you saw *Gran Turismo 2* on the original PlayStation. I don't know if you have those games in your library. Remind yourself. Put them on TV side-by-side. It's a sobering experience. You know, that progression of technology and innovation on the [same format]. The hardware's the same, but the games are completely different. That's the difference between a launch title and a title four or five years later.

With the PlayStation 2, remember, we launched, from a first-party point of view, with *Fantavision*. So, one of those games that we show at [this year's] E3, two years from now, is going to be looked on as the *Fantavision* of the PlayStation 3—which is unfair [to] any one of those titles, but you see my point. We've got a lot of work to do, but we're on the right track. We've got the tools, we've got the technology, we've got the developers with final production alignments up and running, so we're doing some really cool stuff. And I hope you saw the component features in all the demonstrations coming together, even though I know it's not as polished and as deep as it will be.

OPM One of the problems with the PlayStation 2 early on was that it was notoriously hard to develop for, so in terms of marketing the PlayStation 3 to developers—

PH There's kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy there. You know, there's this thing about where if you repeat something often enough, it becomes a fact. And I have to give credit to our friends at Microsoft. They banged on that drum repeatedly until it became considered conventional wisdom. There is an element of truth to it; the PlayStation 2 was harder to develop for than the PlayStation 3 is at its same time. There was a very interesting curve we went through. With the original PlayStation, we had very rich and fully featured libraries for developers to program with. Over time, those libraries got higher and higher performance, but the developers were always somewhat distracted from the hardware. And all the developers, to a man and a woman, said, "Please give us hardware access. We want to write direct to the metal." And so for the PlayStation 2, we said, "OK, here it is." And we just sort of opened it up and handed it to them. And they went, "Do you think we could we could have some libraries, please?" Because it got a bit hard.

And it was mainly because of one thing, which was [that] the vector units on the PlayStation 2 had a very specific and proprietary way of writing code for them. Even though they were incredibly powerful when you managed to harness them, they were hard to program, or they took quite [specialized] skills to program for. The SPUs on the Cell chip are completely different. They're general-purpose programming languages, you can write in C, the interfaces are very much higher-level, and you don't need to have such skills in order to write powerful code for them. So the PlayStation 3 is, definitely, easier and cheaper to develop for, relative to the same period on the PS2.

OPM We've heard that some third-party publishers are having trouble with the approval process for the PlayStation 3, and we were wondering if that's because there were some sort of new standards in place, or if that's just a matter of heading into launch and standards haven't been determined yet?

PH No idea. I've never heard that. I'm not sure that there are actually any games that have been given full stamp yet. I think that they're still working through the process, so that may be what you're picking up. It's certainly not because the policies are changing. In fact, the opposite—we've tried to globalize our policy and make it easier, make it simpler. No, I don't know where that comes from.

OPM You mentioned user-created content being a larger part of the overall strategy as well. How are you seeing the growth for that aspect of the PlayStation 3? Are you seeing people developing minigames that people can download? Are we going to see user-created maps? Is it limitless, essentially?

PH Yeah, it's completely limitless. I think you see a kind of concentric-ring theory: You've got your professional game developer in the sense of your first-party studios, EA, Activision, the major companies that we all know. And then, what I announced at GDC was an initiative to try and embrace the next level of developers who are not the ones that have 60, 70, 80 people working three years on a 50-gigabyte Blu-ray extravaganza, but who can create a content experience that is very relevant for the PlayStation 3 direct for digital download—also for the PSP, not being specific to the PS3. We will work with those teams, we'll fund them where necessary, we'll give them technology where necessary, and we'll give them creative and production guidance where needed. And we will host their products, we will sell them directly to consumers, and then, with all the community features that we're building in, I hope that there's a product that [will make us think], "Wow! Look, that's really resonating strongly with our audience. Maybe we can take that now and invest the $10 or 20 million and take that into a big production." So it may yield some interesting game innovations.

OPM Does that also potentially open the door to things that could theoretically harm the PlayStation 3 or the PSP, like hacks or viruses?

PH Never say never. I mean, obviously, there's always the dark side, and people are always going to try. But [we're taking security measures]; otherwise, we wouldn't be doing the initiative. So, we will obviously work very carefully with companies that we know and trust and then sign our appropriate contract, but I don't think it should be an issue. And then, to pick up on your earlier question, the next concentric ring out is user-created content, which might [entail] making tools available where the user can download them. You know, PlayStation 3 mouse and keyboard, easy to attach—you can then have some semi-professional content creation or completely hobby content creation, upload it to the network, and then that has an exponential effect on the amount of content that you have in the network, and that's what makes a network powerful.

OPM In terms of the games that will be available at launch, are you looking for a balance of different genres, or are you aiming for popular franchises?

PH Well, I think from a first-party point of view, what you're seeing—and I'll include *Warhawk* in this—but what you're seeing are completely new IPs. *Warhawk* came out a long time ago, so to most people, it'll be considered a new IP, but everything else is brand new. And that was a conscious effort, on our part, to establish the format with new franchises. Clearly, when you see third-party products, there are going to be famous brands in there, and there'll be the full mix. But we want to try and set the tone for the PlayStation 3 with new experiences as well.

"WE'VE GOT THE TOOLS, WE'VE GOT THE TECHNOLOGY, WE'VE GOT THE DEVELOPERS..."

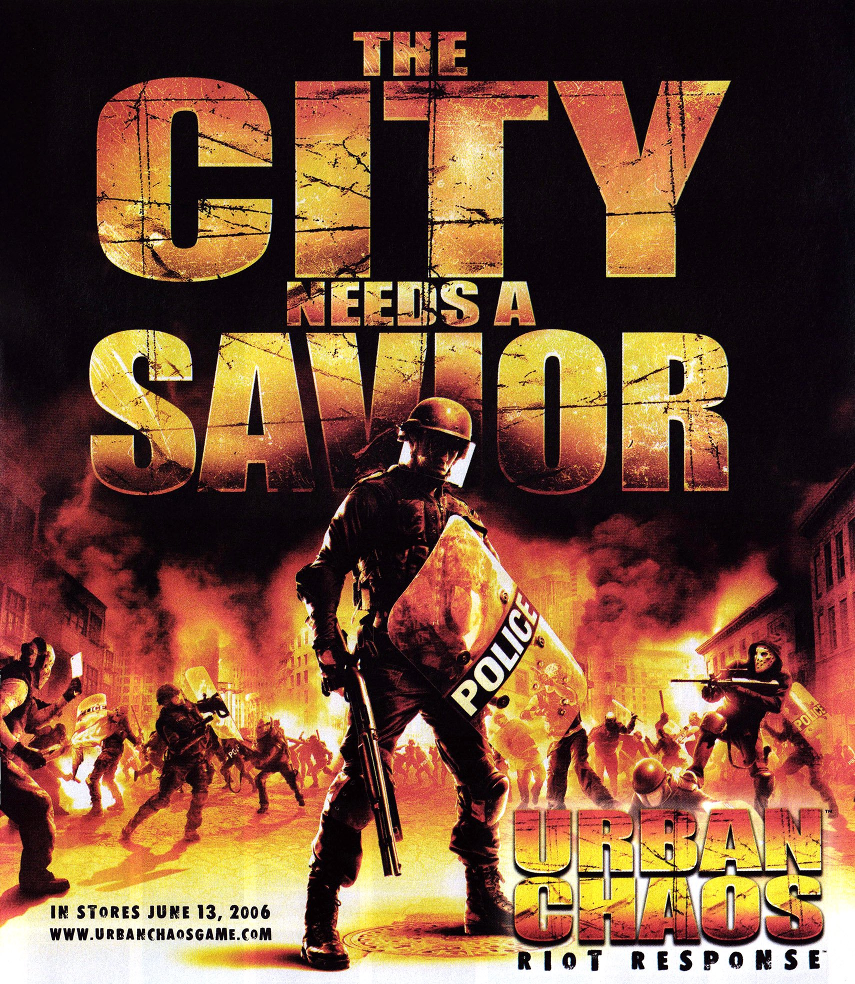
OPM Most people, when they think of a hard drive on a game system, they think of it as just a really big memory card. When you and Kutaragi are encouraging developers to use the hard drive to its full capacity, as someone with a software background, what are you envisioning when you say, "Use the hard drive"?

PH Well, I'll give you an example; Kazunori [Yamauchi, producer of the *Gran Turismo* series] would kill me for this: Imagine *Gran Turismo* shipping on a disc with one car and one track. And then you can browse, online, a dynamic circuit of vehicles that's growing every day because either the car manufacturers are adding new vehicles or we're adding new vehicles. And you can see a specific-type car that's being called up and say, "I think I'll play with that one. Let me download and play it." Maybe the business model allows you to play it for a day; maybe the business model allows you to own it forever. But that content is now yours on your hard drive. Or [maybe you could download] new tracks, new music, whole games.

You know, I think that developers and consumers are going to be presented with different "play packets." There will be the big 50-gigabyte experience led by a Best Buy, a GameStop, and that will be played through in a normal game style, but there will be other games that are totally dynamic, that are more like a service. That's what I was trying to show with the *SingStar* video at the end [of our GDC presentation].

AS FOR THE CONTROLLER

Regarding the PS3 controller: Harrison wouldn't actually tell us if the final design would change or not during the time of this interview. But he did say: "We're keeping our powder dry for something for E3. *[Laughs]* In fact, there are a lot of games in development that you've seen hinted at that we want to keep under wraps."



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MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood and Gore
Strong Language
Intense Violence

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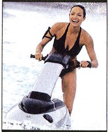
JUNE 06

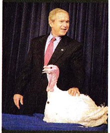
THE MONTH AHEAD FOR YOU AND YOUR PLAYSTATION

SUNDAY



04

You know her as **Lara Croft**. The rest of the world knows her as **Brad's baby-momma**. No matter the label, she's still turning 31 today.



11

It's **Turkey Lovers' Month**. We don't know if this is a celebration for people who like to *eat* turkey or for people who...yeah, never mind.

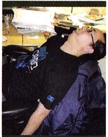
MONDAY

12

June is **Dairy Month**. It is also **Dairy Alternative Month**. Sadly, it is not **Alternative Dairy Month**.

19

The **eight-hour workday** was established 94 years ago in the United States; the news comes as a surprise to *OPM* staffers.



TUESDAY

NEW GAMES

06

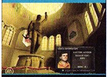
The good news about ***Rengoku 2***: It will be hard for the game to score lower than its 1-blarg-rated predecessor.

13

We're not sure how you can make a ***Fast and the Furious*** game without Vin Diesel, but apparently, you can.

20

Like football games except for all that pesky passing and rushing? Then ***NFL Head Coach*** is for you!



27

We hope EA's ***Superman Returns*** to better gameplay than *Batman* began last summer.

NEW GAMES

WEDNESDAY

07

Be kind, please rewind back to the days when your mom couldn't figure out how to set that blasted timer on this, America's **VCR Day**.

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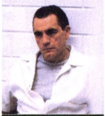
Playin
Losing
Rank: OPM Editor

14

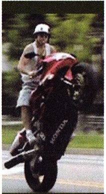
It's **International Webloggers Day**! Go crazy on your 1UP blog and write about canned spinach or whatnot!

THURSDAY



01

Before **Brian Cox** took the role of "the Director" in *Manhunt*, he was the original Hannibal Lecter in *Manhunter*. Which is why we're going to wish him a happy birthday and then run like hell.

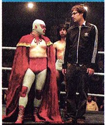


22

We'd tell you today is **Stupid Guy Thing Day**, but we're not sure how that's different from every other day.

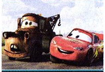
FRIDAY

NEW FLICKS



02

"Jack Black wears spandex pants and a Mexican wrestling mask." If the prior sentence doesn't scare the bejeezus out of you, then you'll like ***Nacho Libre***, out today.



09

Pixar's reign of supremacy is put to the test tonight with the release of ***Cars***, which the staff of *OPM* is very skeptical about.

30

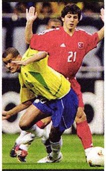
Superman Returns, but should we care? Go to the movies tonight to find out.

NEW FLICKS

SATURDAY

03

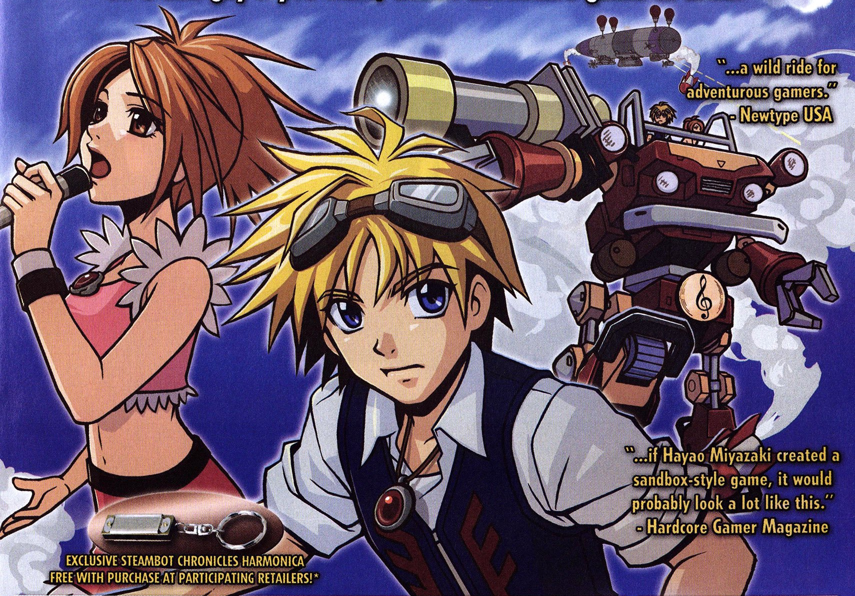
If you love round, sweet pastries with holes in the middle, you'll be thrilled to learn that it is **Doughnut Day**.



10

The most popular sporting event in the world (no, it's not the Super Bowl) began yesterday.

The first non-linear, customize your mech, band making, music playing, be a bad guy if you want, action adventure game in town!



"...a wild ride for adventurous gamers."
- Newtype USA

"...if Hayao Miyazaki created a sandbox-style game, it would probably look a lot like this."
- Hardcore Gamer Magazine

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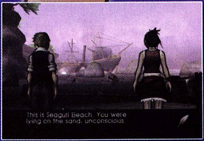
R1 : Camera
□ : Change Gauges


This is Seagull Beach. You were lying on the sand, unconscious

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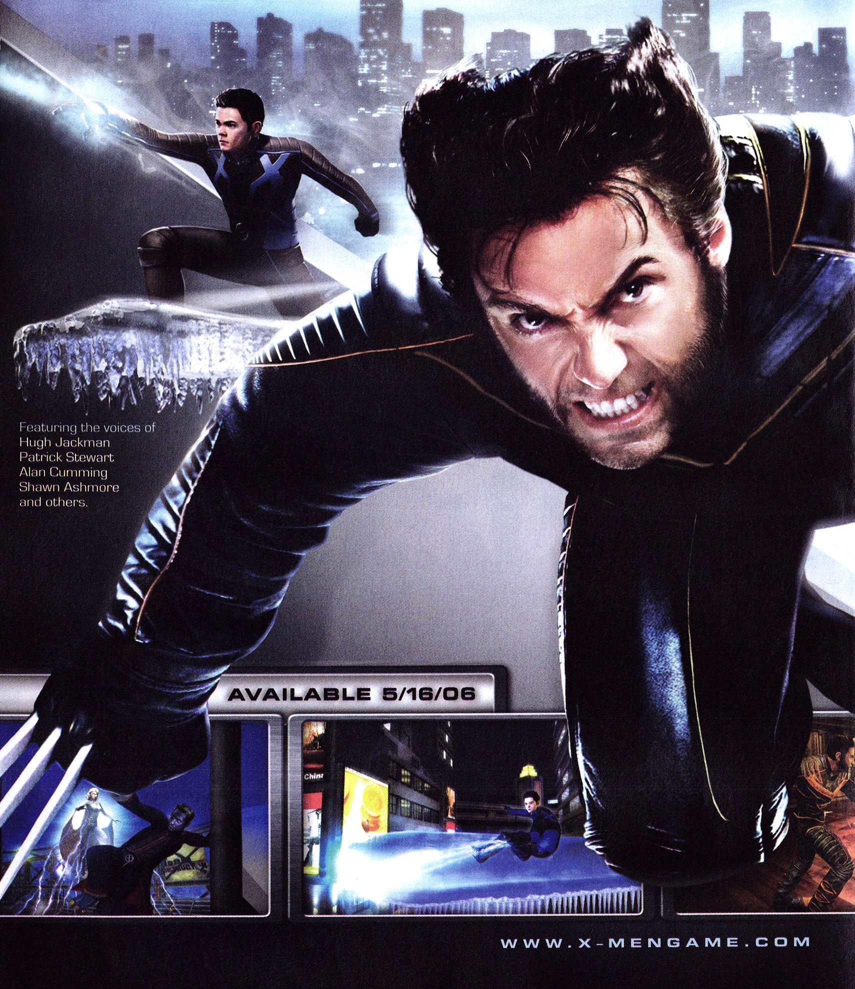
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PlayStation 2

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PS3 COMETH

NEXT-GEN IS ALMOST NOW

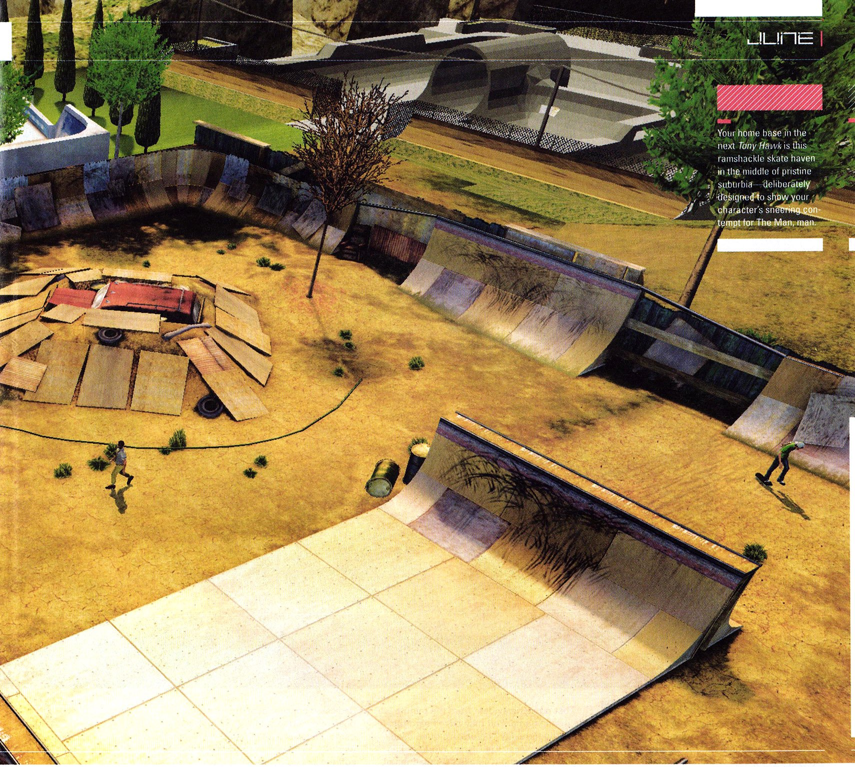
We've been counting down to the launch of the PlayStation 3 for more than a year now. And the countdown is still in progress, but we're getting closer and closer to the time where we'll get to take one of those shiny brand-spanking-new consoles home and make it ours. So in anticipation of that day, we're bringing you not just one but two exclusive reveals of new games that will be gracing your pretty little system. So sit back, turn the pages, and enjoy.

PUB. Activision DEV. Neversoft RELEASE Fall

TONY HAWK:

THE TWO-AND-A-HALF REVOLUTIONS

OPM EXCLUSIVE!



Your home base in the next *Tony Hawk* is this ramshackle skate haven in the middle of pristine suburbia—deliberately designed to show your character's sneering contempt for The Man, man.

NEXT GENERATION

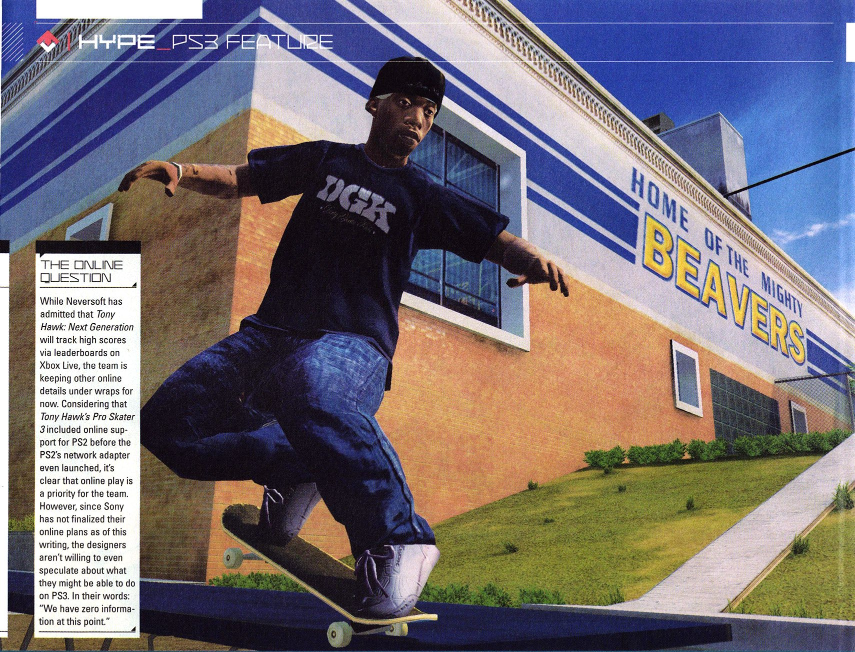
WILL BE TELEVISED

by JOE RYBICKI

"You want to drop in?"

I'm standing in Neversoft's cavernous dining and recreation area, gaping at the 30-foot-long minipipe occupying most of the room. It's a nonchalant question, as though part of the standard welcome-wagon treatment for guests—you know, "Here's the bottled water; here's the coffee; here's the skate ramp in case you want to squeeze off a few tricks while we get everyone into the conference room."

I elect to pass. But it sets the tone nicely for this amiable bunch, these candid, down-to-earth gamers who also happen to live and breathe skating. As we settle in around the vast conference table and direct our attention to the 60-inch plasma TV at the end of the room, a feeling of excitement is in the air. These guys have been making *Tony Hawk* games for more than seven years, and it's clear they're not close to getting sick of them.



THE ONLINE QUESTION

While Neversoft has admitted that *Tony Hawk: Next Generation* will track high scores via leaderboards on Xbox Live, the team is keeping other online details under wraps for now. Considering that *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 3* included online support for PS2 before the PS2's network adapter even launched, it's clear that online play is a priority for the team. However, since Sony has not finalized their online plans as of this writing, the designers aren't willing to even speculate about what they might be able to do on PS3. In their words: "We have zero information at this point."

THE NEXT-GEN SHUFFLE

The current hardware, however, is another story. Neversoft is clearly thrilled to be ditching the PS2 and the Xbox for the greener pastures of the PS3 and the Xbox 360. "With the PS1 and PS2, we pushed both those consoles just as far as they could go for a *Tony Hawk* style of game," says studio art director Chris Ward. "The last PS2 game [*Tony Hawk's American Wasteland*] pushed things just as far as we could; I don't think we could do anything more. If we had to do another *Tony Hawk* on that machine, I think it would be exactly the same. The technology has gone as far as it could possibly go for our kind of game. So this was just a perfect transition."

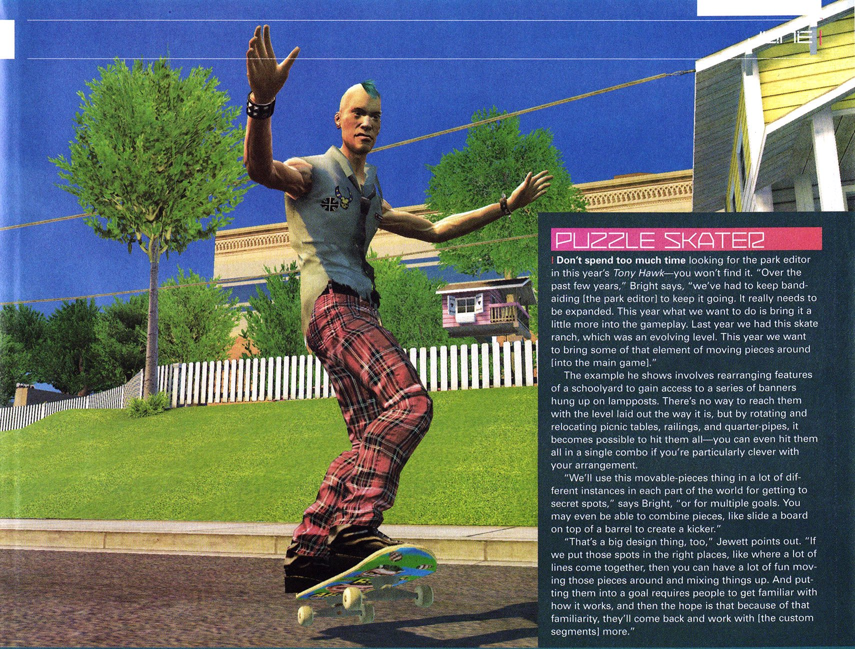
Director of development Scott Pease concurs. "You probably remember the jump from *Tony 2* to *3*, when we went to PS2," he says. "It's kind of that same 'rebirth' process, where we have to throw everything out in a way, take the knowledge we've learned, and then rebuild everything and try to take advantage of the new machine. We're going through that again this year, with an even bigger team and a *lot* more power at our disposal."

That power is evident from the minute we fire up the game. You may have heard the word "hyperreality" before; it's often used to describe places like Disney World or Las Vegas, painstakingly detailed simulations of a world that doesn't really exist. When you see *Tony Hawk: Next Generation* (a working title, obviously) in action, it's hard to avoid the comparison. Little details like the luminous green texture of a well-manicured lawn or the real-time reflections off the surface of a moving pool leave distinct impressions as the landscape flashes by. Focusing on the one bit of screen that's not constantly changing reveals even more detail: Your character is even more intricately modeled than the environment he or she is dashing around in. One guy sports a backpack with individually rendered zipper pulls; each pocket is distinct. Another is a lanky punker with chains a-jingling and detailed piercings. The screen is so packed with detail that it's almost difficult to process all the information being shoehorned into your eyeballs.

It's such a leap visually that Neversoft, for the first time in its history, has hired a dedicated concept department for the purpose of ensuring a consistent look across the game. "It takes a lot of people to create these worlds," says Joel Jewett, president of Neversoft (described by his employees as the "resident redneck angry guy who keeps everyone in line"). The concept department, he tells us, "adds people to your process, but at the same time it can streamline and make your process go more quickly, because people don't have to sit there and try to figure out what this world should look like."

"One of the big things you can do is work out changes and ideas," says Ward. "Paper's cheap. To actually create the geometry, the look, is a very expensive and time-consuming process. So we do a lot of experimentation on paper for new ideas, and it gives you a good base, a grounding."

But don't think the move to the next generation is all about appearances. "I think it's back to the core of what the game is," says Pease, "and the game is all about a skateboarder under your control interacting with this highly detailed world. And now we can make all those components feel so much



PUZZLE SKATER

Don't spend too much time looking for the park editor in this year's *Tony Hawk*—you won't find it. "Over the past few years," Bright says, "we've had to keep band-aiding [the park editor] to keep it going. It really needs to be expanded. This year what we want to do is bring it a little more into the gameplay. Last year we had this skate ranch, which was an evolving level. This year we want to bring some of that element of moving pieces around [into the main game]."

The example he shows involves rearranging features of a schoolyard to gain access to a series of banners hung up on lampposts. There's no way to reach them with the level laid out the way it is, but by rotating and relocating picnic tables, railings, and quarter-pipes, it becomes possible to hit them all—you can even hit them all in a single combo if you're particularly clever with your arrangement.

"We'll use this movable-pieces thing in a lot of different instances in each part of the world for getting to secret spots," says Bright, "or for multiple goals. You may even be able to combine pieces, like slide a board on top of a barrel to create a kicker."

"That's a big design thing, too," Jewett points out. "If we put those spots in the right places, like where a lot of lines come together, then you can have a lot of fun moving those pieces around and mixing things up. And putting them into a goal requires people to get familiar with how it works, and then the hope is that because of that familiarity, they'll come back and work with [the custom segments] more."

more realistic and get you closer to more of a true skating experience."

A UNITED WORLD

Part of the benefit of next-gen technology is the ability to build one giant, unified world. Last year's *Tony Hawk's American Wasteland* attempted to present a free-roaming version of Los Angeles, but the effect was spoiled by the need to insert "loading tunnels" between the different neighborhoods to give the game time to spool up the next area. This year, when the designers say "free-roaming," they mean it.

"Last year we built a lot," says project lead Brian Bright, "but unfortunately, we didn't quite use all of it. This year we really want to focus on having compelling gameplay in a lot of different spots all over the world. It gives us an opportunity, also, to spread the goals out, have them go between zones. We can probably have a goal that takes a line all the way across the whole world."

The distinction between designing a level and designing a *world* is an important one. "When you design a level," explains Pease, "you always have to be concerned about the end of the level, the periphery—usually that ends up being a 'kill plane,' a 'you went out of bounds' kind of thing. And you always have to design your lines to sort of wrap you around and around a circle inside this level. What we're finding now, by making a streaming world, is that we can route lines that send you across the world. And we can fill all that area that used to be dead periphery."

"All the areas are as open as possible," adds Ward. "You can enter each zone from any direction, just like you would in the real world. There's not a fence you have to go through."

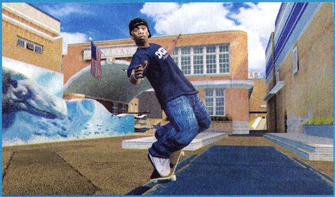
This is important, because rather than basing the game on a real city as in last year's version, Neversoft is creating this new world from scratch. "The overall theme is Middle America," Jewett says. "Last year was the city, but I was like, 'There are a lot more people out there skateboarding outside of the cities, so let's go check out Middle America.' So we sent our guys on missions out to Middle America to hang out with cameras."

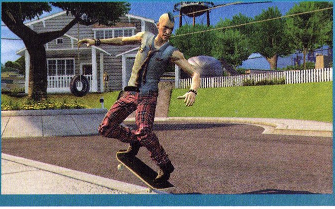
What they came back with was a *Hawk*-ified vision of suburbia—Anytown, USA, as visualized by skate fiends. Your home base is a tumbledown house in the middle of a cul-de-sac; as the lone skater in the neighborhood, you're the only one with a half-pipe in your backyard...but that doesn't mean there isn't plenty to trick off of in your neighbors' yards. And down on Main Street. And over at the school. And up the hill at the amusement park....

> "WE HAVE TO THROW EVERYTHING OUT IN A WAY, AND THEN REBUILD."

"The best elements of the real world are woven into our own world, like the best of the best," says Ward. "Kind of like we did with Skate Heaven [in *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2*]—but an entire game of Skate Heaven."

The significant thing is that all these areas really do flow seamlessly together. Get some





GO OLD SCHOOL

Tony Hawk's new features aren't all serious, fundamental changes in game content. Here's an addition that some of us have expected for years: Those arcade machines that have been scattered around levels in the past few games are now actually playable. Each one takes a classic arcade formula and infuses it with *Tony Hawk* gameplay. We were sworn to secrecy regarding the specific influences, but if you think really hard, you can probably come up with a few ideas of your own. No, not that one. Yeah, OK, now you're on the right track. But keep it to yourself, understand?

good air off the cupola of City Hall and you'll be able to see across the entire world—and if you can see it, you can skate it.

BUILDING MOMENTUM

The design of *Tony Hawk: Next Generation* is about more than a streaming world, however. A lot more. In the past, the franchise would undergo fairly significant modifications as a result of the simple addition of new moves that helped to build longer combos. The introduction of the manual in *Tony 2* made it possible to string together flatland tricks, for example; *Tony 3*'s revert maneuver extended ramp combos; the ability to get off your board in *Tony Hawk's Underground* made for even greater possibilities. But these were all additions, not really substantial changes.

Now, for the first time in the series' history, Neversoft is making changes to the fundamental physics of the game. "We're making momentum play a larger role in the game," Bright says, "so it takes longer to pump walls, but you can get going much faster going down hills. So you'll want to look for downslopes in gameplay—and we're going to use that in goals, both to be able to hit interesting gaps and to get to places you couldn't get to before. And we're making the player, in a fun way, kind of work for it. It's not like you can just start [from a standing position] and hit the big jump and make the gap. You'll have to think, 'I have to hit this half-pipe, hit this one, and build my speed up.' And true ramp carving, where you go up, carve the ramp, feel that rush coming down the ramp—that's something that was pretty high on our list to hit this year."

"Work in a fun way" may sound a bit ominous, but don't worry. "Our primary focus is making it fun," Bright is quick to point out. "So we want to get more of those elements in but not take it to the total *Thrasher* simulation style where it's incredibly difficult to do one kickflip. That's not fun."

Balancing fun, realism, and difficulty is a challenge, to be sure. "Last year we didn't scale the game as well as we could have," says Bright. "We had complaints that the game was too easy and catered more to first-time players—and that was kind of by design; we wanted to open the franchise up more."

In order to address the issue, Neversoft is adding multiple tiers of difficulty for every goal in this year's game. "You no longer have to select a difficulty at the beginning and then just be stuck with it," Bright says. "Each goal is going to have three different levels of difficulty: amateur, pro, and sick. And the sick [level] is gonna be *really* sick."

He shows one example: The player has to follow a guy with a video camera and pull off the tricks he calls out. The first 10 tricks—the amateur level—are no trouble whatsoever. Once you've pulled off 10 tricks, you have technically completed that goal...but Camera Dude is still filming and calling out tricks.

> "WORK IN A FUN WAY" MAY SOUND A BIT OMINOUS, BUT DON'T WORRY.

THE FUN FACTOR

The balance of fun and realism is "something we've been managing ever since *Tony Hawk 1*," says Jewett. "Should we *simulate* skateboarding, or should we not? But the decision-making process always came back down to 'It's more fun.' That's not real, is it? Nope, it sure as s*** ain't real. But who wants to hit the X button to kick through the whole game?"

THE PLAYSTATION UNDERGROUND: ARE YOU MISSING SOMETHING?

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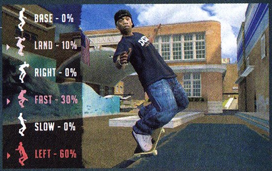

THE REANIMATORS

To complement the more realistic momentum system, Neversoft decided to take another look at the way *Tony Hawk* characters were animated. In doing so, they discovered that next-generation platforms give them the horsepower to actually blend up to 10 different animations, layering them to create shockingly realistic movement.

"Last year our animation was very simple," admits lead animator Jason Greenberg. "It would just play. It didn't matter where you were in the world or what you were doing; it always looked the same. So, this year we wanted to build animations based on where your skater is in the world and what you're doing."

"Our grinds in the past were just one animation," says animator Cody Pierson by way of example, "and it would just scrub through the animation back and forth to make [the character] look on- or off-balance. Now there are several animations going on at once." Neversoft gave us the screenshot above to illustrate the concept. On the left side you see a range of possible animations; the percentages indicate how much of each is being blended into the current movement. As you can see, the pose looks much more lifelike than in previous games. It's even more powerful when you see it in action.

"Overall, this game is really about a body in motion," says Jewett. "Our core audience, the actual skaters, those guys sit at home and watch skate videos all the time. So we've known ever since *Tony Hawk 1* that we were going to have these guys picking apart what we do. This time around I think we're finally getting to the point where we can say, 'Go for it, dudes—pick away.'

These next 10—the pro level—are simple combos of the ollie-and-grab variety. Finish those and you earn your pro rating...but the tape's still rolling. Now you're being asked for combos on the order of wallride-kickflip-manual. Complete 10 of those and you're officially sick...and a better player than most.

"We just see such a wide curve of skills players have," explains Bright. "But we can't dumb it down too much. Amateurs will be able to get through the game, but they won't really *finish* the game. There's going to be tons of unlockables and achievements to encourage players to really get through the game on the higher difficulty levels."

> "THE IDEA IS TO TURN WHAT IS NOT GAMEPLAY INTO GAMEPLAY."

LET FREEDOM RING

Variety is another key ingredient in Neversoft's quest to draw in the widest range of players. The way to prevent the less-skilled player's feeling of hitting a wall, Bright says, is to drastically increase the number of different goals available to the player at one time. "This year there are always going to be like 10 to 15 different things to do at once," he says. "It's going to be very nonlinear. You'll have your choice of what you want to do and how you want to progress. Another thing we're doing this year is rewarding you more for just skating around, not being in a mission or a goal or anything—along with bringing back the more *THUG*-style, RPG-ish stat increases. Impressing pedestrians, doing big combos in front of people, will get you what we're calling 'stokens.' You'll be able to spend those at the skate shop on special tricks and various other things, like special decks, stats, or superstats that you can't acquire just skating around—some cosmetic [items] and some things that'll actually help you in the game."

Another key is giving the player more to, well, *play* with. "Another thing we've added this year," Bright continues, "is a rag-doll bail that's all controllable. You can turn the guy with the shoulder buttons, flip him around, slide him along the ground, and we track how many bones you break—and you get scored on it. That's kind of replaced our tantrum."

He demonstrates by deliberately flubbing a grab. The character does an extremely painful-looking face-plant, then proceeds to skid and roll down the hill, limbs flapping and flailing in an excruciating ballet. Icons start scrolling across the bottom of the screen: sprain... sprain...broken bone...broken bone...broken bone. It's actually hard to watch.

"The idea there is to turn what is not gameplay into gameplay," says Pease, "if you're into it. You'll still be able to get up quickly if you just want to get up and skate. But if you want to have fun—and we're finding it's fun even in this early stage just to play around with it and create gnarly wrecks—you can do that."

The new gameplay elements aren't just incidental, though; some are designed to help tie the game in more closely to its hardcore

BODY IN MOTTION

This new animation system will be so realistic that players will "just feel it in their subconscious," Jewett claims. "They're not even going to ask the question; they're just going to feel like this game feels better. Unfortunately, if we do our job right, no one will notice. Unless someone else makes a boarding game and [players] put the two next to each other."

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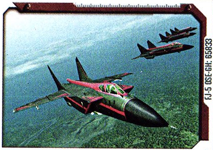

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PROS INSIDE

One of the most obvious upgrades for this next-gen game is the vastly improved quality of the in-game models. What should excite skate fans everywhere, though, is how this extends to the pros' in-game models.

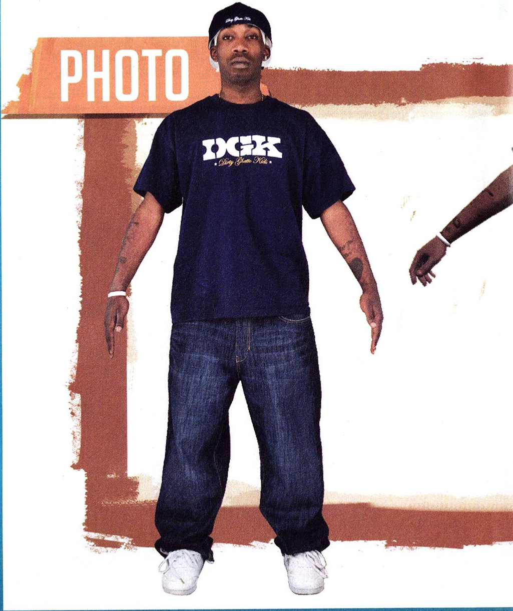
"We got every pro in for motion capture," says Bright, "and rented a face scanner and a body-scanning system. So every pro who came in got their head scanned and their body scanned—so we can really jack up the detail on the pros this year and [catch] all their little nuances in motion capture."

"This is pure next gen," adds Ward, "because we can put a lot more polygons in there. We can use this technology the movie studios have and put it into our game, which is just totally cool."

The resulting models are staggering in their detail. The Holywood-quality face scanner generated a 3D model of each pro that consisted of something on the order of 350,000 polygons, resulting in painstaking detail down to the blemish level. And even though the heads are being scaled back to around 2,000 polygons for the in-game models, the fine detail of the original scan allows the character artists to create photo-realistic faces the likes of which we've never seen before.

But these ridiculously realistic models wouldn't mean jack if the characters didn't move in the way they should. That's why Neversoft brought in each pro from the game and turned them loose in the company's in-house motion-capture studio, drawing hours of animation data straight from the pros themselves. So if you see, say, Rodney Mullen do a casper to 360 flip in the game, it's *actually* Rodney Mullen doing a casper to 360 flip, since the animation will be drawn from the data collected in the motion-capture sessions.

"One thing that's neat about this stuff," says motion-capture and cinematics lead Jeff Swenty, "is that the pros would come in and see that the machine was picking up every single minute thing they were doing. Like, Daewon [Song] had this one trick that he really wanted to do, and I think he did like 30 takes before he did it, because for him it turned into a point of pride thing—because everyone's going to see this data."



skater roots. "One of the main things you get from this game is gaps," says Bright. "It's never been exploited before, but it's the most core skating thing because skaters are always looking for big gaps. So we're really going to play up finding and completing gaps a lot more this year. We're going to use our focus mode to be able to see where gaps are in the world. And that'll all play into our progression, which will be way more nonlinear than before." It's clear that the expanded potential of the next generation has given the team lots of room to stretch.

"WE'RE GOING TO PLAY UP FINDING AND COMPLETING GAPS A LOT MORE."

PREPARING FOR LAUNCH

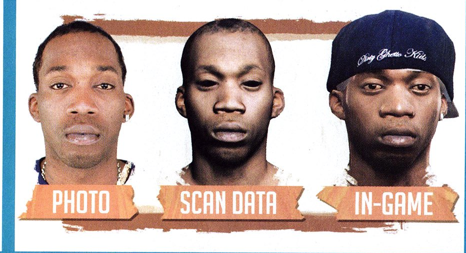
You may notice that I've been using the generic "next-generation" moniker throughout this story, rather than PS3 specifically. Now don't be alarmed; the game will definitely be coming out on PS3, and is currently slated to release "this fall"—in other words, shortly after launch, if not *at* launch. But while Neversoft has the game up and running on PS3 hardware, the game is, as Pease says, "limping." We crowd around the (almost indescribably noisy) PS3 development kit to see what's running so far, and discover that while the basic geometry of the game is all present and accounted for, it's missing pretty much every beautifying feature—like, for example, any textures. That, and it runs at somewhere around five frames per second.

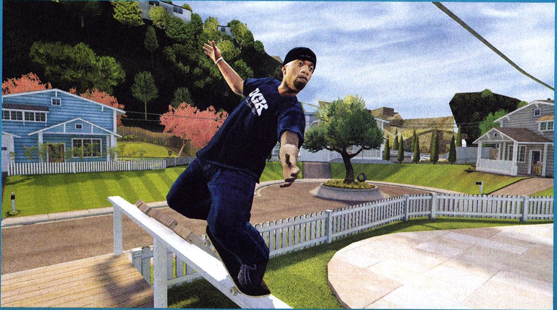
The reason, the developers say, is that it's not an efficient use of their time to devote a lot of resources to bringing the game onto the PS3 when the PS3 specs are still in flux. So they've brought over the basic architecture of the game but plan to wait until the final revisions of the development kit before putting in the finishing touches. This prompts the question of whether they're finding the PS3 harder to develop for than the Xbox 360.

"I don't think we know yet," says Pease. "We don't have final enough hardware to understand what it's capable of. The specs on paper [make the PS3] look like it'll be equal to or better [than the 360], but at this point what we have is a giant, noisy thing [that doesn't have] the full, final PS3 specs. So we're trying to plan the game with that in mind, hoping that it's going to continue to improve. And I'm sure it will as they release more and more dev kits. But that's always the tricky part about dealing with the launch-window thing. New hardware, new dev kits coming in, and each one gives you a little bit more power to play with, but you're still not sure where the line is going to be at the end of the day. We went through this last year with Microsoft as well."

Bright agrees. "Yes, we didn't know what the drive speed was going to be, how fast we could get the data off the drive, up until a month before the game shipped," he says. "And this year it's going to be worse, because Sony's got Blu-ray. We're not going to see that for months. It's very tricky."

IN-GAME
DGK
Dirty Ghetto Kids





"But on their side, they fight all the way out the door with what they can cost-effectively put into that box," counters Jewett. "So that's tricky on their part, also. They want to make the strongest machine they can, but it's still gotta have a price point that will allow people to buy it. We all live and breathe by the number of hardware units that are out there."

And those specs include such important details as whether the machine will in fact ship with a hard drive in every box. I have to ask, how do you develop for something you're not sure is in the box? "You kind of don't," Jewett says. "You kind of have to assume it's not going to be in the box, which is a bummer. You scratch your head and go, 'F***, what are we going to do now?'"

"That's the trickiest thing about those kinds of announcements, where they want to play the waiting game," adds Pease. "It definitely affects our development because we have to make assumptions now about what the machine's going to be able to do. A hard drive would be a very, very cool thing."

"You just make the best game you can make on the Xbox 360," says Jewett, "and try not to dwell on it too much. But you know that several months of this summer are going to really suck ass for you as you try to get all that s*** to work on the other machine."

This isn't new territory for Neversoft, though. "I think it's pretty similar [to the PS2 and Xbox launches]," says Jewett, "except maybe compounded by the fact that every single company has grown by leaps and bounds in the last five or six years, so we're trying to organize bigger teams here, and Sony's trying to organize bigger teams over there to build this thing and launch it. And Microsoft, they scrambled like sons of bitches—and their launch was not smooth by any stretch of the imagination—but they certainly put the pressure on Sony. It's pretty interesting, really. I still believe that the mindshare that Sony has is just unbelievably huge and valuable."

But "huge and valuable" does not equal "indestructible"—and demand for the PS3 is likely to outstrip supply this holiday season. "That lead could get eaten away this Christmas," Jewett points out, "especially if Microsoft can stockpile and get to the point where there's just stacks of their s***, and they can drop the price or something when [PS3] comes out. Hoo-hoo, could be interesting."

Things could get even more interesting if it turns out to be harder than expected for developers to get up to speed on the final PS3. "If there ends up being a compromise in quality between games this Christmas on their machine *vis-à-vis* games on the Xbox 360, that could be a pretty tricky scenario," Jewett continues. "But I do believe [Sony has] that mindshare." The trick, he believes, is to "show up with enough units this Christmas and a couple must-have titles that they've developed internally. Last year at E3 there was absolutely no expectation, and they popped up with a pretty good PR and marketing pitch and stole a lot of Microsoft's thunder."

It's clear, though, that the folks at Neversoft aren't too concerned about who's stealing thunder from whom. They seem perfectly content to keep chugging away on whatever system's available, pushing each one as far as it'll go—and getting any system-launch frustrations out on that minipipe. They just want to keep making games that people have fun with. It's what they do.

YOUR OWN PRIVATE PRO

Neversoft plans to squeeze in a 3D trick viewer that lets players watch their favorite pros performing signature tricks. But since the pros will be the ultrarealistic in-game models and the tricks will be rendered on-the-fly from the motion-capture data, the player will be able to view the trick from any angle, zoom in and out, pause, reverse, and watch the trick in slow motion.

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MERCENARIES: WORLD IN FLAMES

YOUR A-TO-Z GUIDE ON PANDEMIC'S FIRST NEXT-GEN GAME

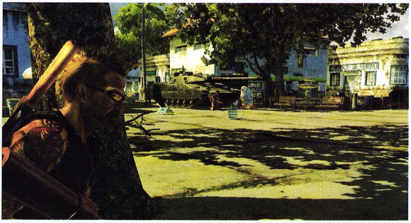
by THIERRY NGUYEN

de MER
VITAMINAS

"***Mercenaries* always** wanted to be a next-generation game," says Josh Resnick, president of Pandemic Studios.

Mercenaries: World in Flames director Cameron Brown quickly interjects, "We had to cap out the time our AI was using, cap out our level of detail, and cap out our physics to get the game running on the current-gen systems."

So one could imagine the glee that Pandemic had in putting its very big game idea (a mercenary dropped into a "playground of destruction") into a system like the PS3. Such a big idea requires a different treatment, so we've opted to break down *MWIF* into a handy glossary for quick reference and perusal....



A WORLD OF FIRE...

The previous *Mercenaries* game was subtitled "Playground of Destruction," and this next installment won't depart from those roots. While Pandemic won't give a hard number for things like the amount of weapons and vehicles, you can safely assume that, as in the last game, there will be plenty of hardware to shoot and drive. Check out this sequence off Mattias blowing the crap out of a tank and some local Venezuelans. As you might expect, whoever those Venezuelans work for won't be too eager to hire Mattias if he hits them up for a job.

A

Arvidsjaur: A small village located in northern Sweden and the hometown of Mattias Nilsson. Reputed to be a lawless "Swedish hillbilly town," as described by Brown—the nearest police presence is four hours away. As you might guess, this allows for all sorts of unsavory activities to take place without the interference of any law authorities. This also gives you an insight into the character of Mattias. See also: **characterization; Nilsson, Mattias; Stormare, Peter**

B

Bounty: A basic aspect of *MWIF* gameplay. The focus of the game is to perform mission contracts for certain factions and to capture or kill high-value targets in order to get paid bounty money which, in turn, can be used to buy new weapons and vehicles. See also: **Deck of 52, freedom**

C

Characterization: One of the aspects that the *Mercenaries* team felt could be improved from the previous game. Pandemic recognizes that most players only remember the primary characters of *Mercenaries* as "the American, the chick, and the Swede." The team focused on building actual backstory and motivation when defining characters for *MWIF*. See also: **Nilsson, Mattias; reactivity**

City: Next-generation development allows for detailed, populated cities to be part of the landscape. Brown comments, "The next generation feels more like looking out the window at a real city than driving around a game." See also: **civilian, collateral damage**

Civilian: A significant new addition to *MWIF*. Due to the game taking place in a populated region as opposed to the military zone of the first game, noncombatants play a larger role than they did before. Civilians can affect the amount of access you have to parts of the game world, attempt to deter you, influence which contracts you can accept, and so on. See also: **collateral damage, freedom**

> NONCOMBATANTS NOW PLAY A LARGER ROLE THAN BEFORE.

Collateral damage: Any surplus damage that you inflict upon objects or people (like buildings being hit by an explosion or civilians accidentally getting caught in the crossfire) outside of the primary target. Collateral damage isn't tolerated, and it can affect things such as who is still willing to work with you and what missions are available. See also: **civilian, freedom**

F

Fire: One of the significant gameplay additions to *MWIF*, and Brown's answer to the question, "What's the one thing that you wanted to do on the current gen but had to wait until the next gen to implement?" Says Brown: "I've wanted to do some interesting fire gameplay for a long time, but it wasn't really feasible until now. Fire is a very complicated, organic thing, so it's an interesting creative and technical challenge to make it into a fun toy for the player. Let me give you an example of how it works—and remember that this is a completely general-purpose system that the player can use anywhere as long as the right ingredients are present.

"Let's say you want to take out the guards at a base. You're up on a hill overlooking the base, and you're equipped with a sniper rifle. Looking through the scope, you see an oil tank with a car parked next to it. Hmmm... You take aim at the tank, and POP! You put a hole in the bottom. Fuel starts spilling out, creating a stream that travels away from the tank. The trap is set.

"Now to attract the guards. You shift your aim until the windshield of the car is in the crosshairs. SMASH! The screen explodes in a shower of glass. You lower the scope and see the guards—alerted by the sound—coming to investigate. You take aim at the back of the car and wait for the perfect moment—this is a skill shot. BLAM! The bullet hits the car at the perfect angle to glance off in a shower of sparks. The sparks land on the fuel trail, igniting it. The guards notice the fire and start to panic and backpedal. But it's too late! The fire races along the trail to the tank: KA-BOOM! The tank explodes, taking the guards—and the nearby car—with it." See also: **freedom, physics**

D

Deck of 52: A method used by Coalition troops during the Iraq War to identify high-value targets, such as officers within Saddam's regime. Used as the main gameplay element in *Mercenaries*, but now has been abandoned for a new (and unrevealed) system that allows for more freedom. See also: **bounty**

E

"Everything is a tool": Design mantra for *MWIF*. The basic idea that everything, whether a weapon or a building or a faction or a contract or a tree, is a tool that the player can use to advance in the game. See also: **freedom**

F

Freedom: One of the basic tenets of *MWIF*. Describes the mercenary's own freedom. Brown illustrates this point with phrases like "free to do your own thing, free to say no to authority figures, free to move between the civilian and the military world." Also describes the pure mechanical freedom of the gameplay. The player simply receives a goal and is then left alone to experiment with the gameplay in order to figure out how to achieve said goal. See also: **civilian, "everything is a tool," physics**

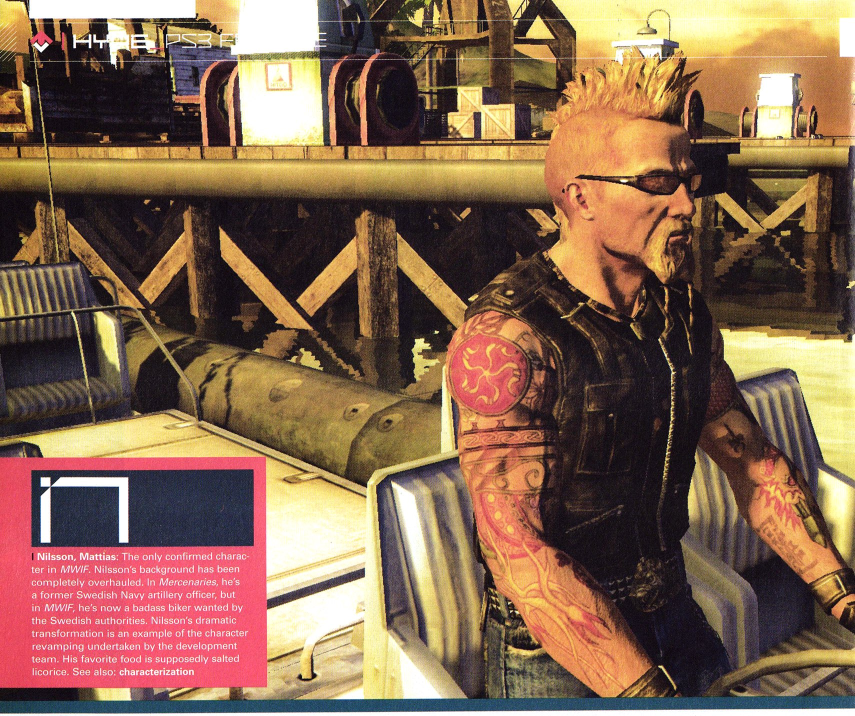
NO LONGER ARE BUILDINGS MERELY DESTROYED OR INTACT.

G

Granularity: A small measurement of volume. Also the term for an effect that's possible in next-generation development, as buildings and objects are treated as granular. No longer are buildings limited to the two static conditions of being either destroyed or intact; it is now possible to destroy portions of buildings and vehicles. Shoot the wheels or treads off of jeeps and tanks, tear chunks of a plane's wing off, or take out the bottom corner of a building. See also: **city, fire, oil rig, height, physics**

H

Harrier: A special British fighter jet that can take off and land vertically like a helicopter. Implied as part of the vehicle pool in *MWIF*. Also used in this statement from Brown to describe the expanded freedom in *MWIF*: "It makes just as much sense in this [*Mer-*



N

Nilsson, Mattias: The only confirmed character in *MWIF*. Nilsson's background has been completely overhauled. In *Mercenaries*, he's a former Swedish Navy artillery officer, but in *MWIF*, he's now a badass biker wanted by the Swedish authorities. Nilsson's dramatic transformation is an example of the character revamping undertaken by the development team. His favorite food is supposedly salted licorice. See also: **characterization**

cenaries] universe to roll up in either a Harley- Davidson or a stolen Harrier." See also: **freedom**

Height: A hitherto unmentioned aspect of the *Mercenaries* game world. Not only is *MWIF*'s world larger in width and length than the original game was (even when you combine all the separate maps of the first game into one), but height is implied as another important consideration. Since there will be cities in *MWIF*, one can reasonably assume that there will be a lot of tall buildings to destroy. The most significant example of height as a measure of game space is the use of multiple oil platforms, which can often rise more than 150 feet above the water's surface. See also: **granularity, oil rig, physics**

I

Intelligence: Similar to Xbox 360 title *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion's* radiant AI, the reactive AI in *MWIF* allows the game to reason out things in real time. This is due to the PS3's ability to dedicate additional processing power to AI.

An example: The player parks a helicopter and then starts running toward an AI soldier. The AI soldier will see the player and perceive them as a threat; then see the helicopter and perceive it as a possible tool to use against the player; then consider factors such as proximity of the player, the helicopter, and other friendly soldiers; extrapolate where the player might be going; and then figure out whether to simply attack or to attempt to go to the parked helicopter. See also: **reactivity**

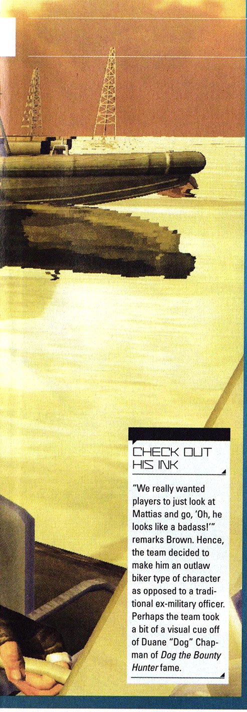
> IT MAKES JUST AS MUCH SENSE TO ROLL UP IN A HARLEY OR A HARRIER.

J

Jump from current gen to next gen: Brown uses a programming analogy to describe the jump from current- to next-gen development: "It's like going from C to C++." He also states that while getting a game up and running on the PS3 now is comparatively easier than getting something to run on the PS2 in its early days, that kind of thinking "only gets you 50 percent." To take full advantage of the PS3, developers need to rethink the way they make a game and go from there. See also: **yield, zounds**

K

Killing Pablo: A novel by Mark Bowden (*Black Hawk Down*) about the hunt for cocaine lord Pablo Escobar. Also one of the touchstone sources for research in *MWIF*. Brown comments, "This is fascinating book, and it helped us identify some areas of further research on



CHECK OUT HIS INK

"We really wanted players to just look at Mattias and go, 'Oh, he looks like a badass!'" remarks Brown. Hence, the team decided to make him an outlaw biker type of character as opposed to a traditional ex-military officer. Perhaps the team took a bit of a visual cue off of Duane "Dog" Chapman of *Dog the Bounty Hunter* fame.

themes that fit well in a South American environment." See also: ***Man on Fire*, Venezuela**

L

Light: Something that benefits from next-generation power. The lighting model now allows for a real-time shadow system that does things like accurate self-shadows (e.g., seeing the shadow of a helicopter's rotors on the chassis itself). Also, there will be a functioning real-time day/night cycle, so lighting conditions are always changing. See also: **jump from current gen to next gen, physics**

M

Man on Fire: Tony Scott-directed movie, starring Denzel Washington and Dakota Fanning, about a bodyguard protecting a child in Mexico City. Also one of the inspirations for *MWIF*. Brown elaborates: "*Man on Fire* was something we looked at closely, since it has a very unique visual style." See also: ***Killing Pablo***

O

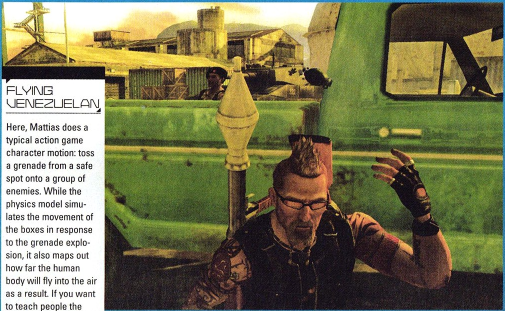
Oil rig: A signature structure in *MWIF*. Demonstrates new environments (several oil rigs are located off the coast of Venezuela), the use of height (oil platforms are very tall structures after all), and the importance of physics in general gameplay.

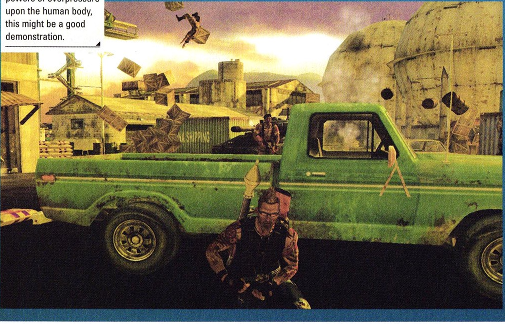
> THIS OIL RIG IS LIKE TWO FOOTBALL FIELDS STUCK TOGETHER...

Brown describes a key gameplay aspect of *MWIF*: "The destruction of a giant oil rig. And when I say giant, I mean BIG! This thing is like two football fields stuck together. To say that blowing this thing up has been a development challenge is like saying that Tiger Woods is pretty good at golf! But we're able to do it—and track all the stuff on top—thanks to the power of the next-gen systems. One really interesting part of this is the water shockwave; we generate a giant splash (imagine dropping a football stadium into the ocean!) and a wave that expands out, affecting everything in its path." See also: **fire, granularity, height, physics**

P

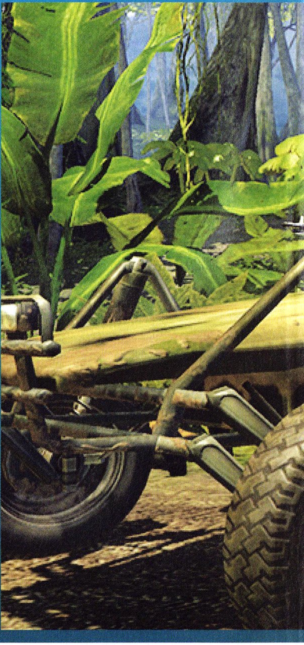
Physics: A large component of gameplay that's made possible by the increased technical capabilities of the PS3. Brown describes an example of physics-based gameplay: "Consider a 100-story skyscraper and a helicopter with rockets. The game can handle the player shooting the building from any height,





FLYING VENEZUELAN

Here, Mattias does a typical action game character motion: toss a grenade from a safe spot onto a group of enemies. While the physics model simulates the movement of the boxes in response to the grenade explosion, it also maps out how far the human body will fly into the air as a result. If you want to teach people the powers of overpressure upon the human body, this might be a good demonstration.



on any side, from any angle. The building will get torn up accordingly. We also track the structural integrity, so that if players focus the destruction in one area, that part of the building will collapse. Eventually, the whole thing will come down. That's already a pretty heavy use of physics, but I skipped over the secondary physics effects—the giant chunks of concrete that fall off, plummet to the street below, and squash the cars parked there. The panels and parts that fly off the squashed car, hit a passerby, and knock him down like a rag doll." Physics is now possible due to the PS3's multiple processors, which allow developers to do more of everything without having to sacrifice as much in terms of graphics or framerate. See also: **fire, granularity, height, oil rig**

> "WE TRACK THE STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY OF EVERY BUILDING."

Q

| **Quarrel**: Like in *Mercenaries*, expect to see different AI characters react to each other based on their factions. Don't be surprised to see the military fighting drug-cartel members—and the quarreler of whomever you choose to aid quarreling with you as well. See also: **reactivity, underworld**

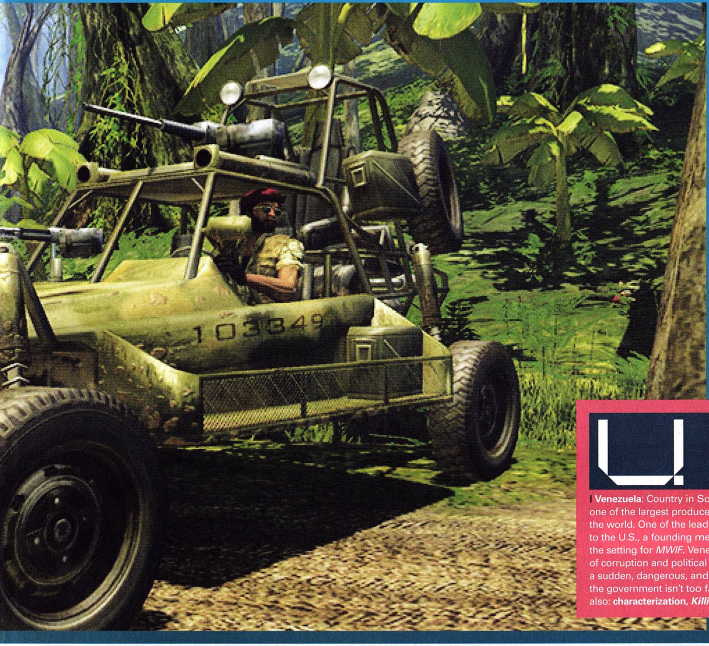
R

| **Reactivity**: A key aspect of *MWIF*. The basic tenet is that everything in the world responds to the player's actions and gives the player appropriate feedback. Reactivity also governs things such as how other characters relate to you, the relationships that you forge between yourself and other characters and factions, and what your options are when it comes to areas of the game world to access and contracts to undertake. See also: **civilians, collateral damage, intelligence**

S

| **Seamless**: Used to describe the overall game world (you can run across the entirety of the world without seeing a loading screen) and how the mercenary can find himself going from a military encampment to a drug lord's palace to an urban city. See also: **city, freedom, reactivity**

| **Stormare, Peter**: Swedish actor known for playing roles involving foreign accents, such as a Russian cosmonaut in *Armageddon*. Also currently seen in various Volkswagen commercials. Voices Mattias Nilsson and has real-life relatives who live near Arvidsjaur. See also: **Arvidsjaur; Nilsson, Mattias**



WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE

If you ignore the random Venezuelan in the driver's seat, you'll notice that this vehicle has a few empty spots: namely, the passenger and gunner seats. One of the subtle tweaks that the *MWIF* team brought to the game is the ability to seamlessly move from one vehicle position to another, so Mattias can quickly and smoothly move from driver to gunner position if need be. Also, another vehicle-related consideration: You can fail to hijack a vehicle. So don't be surprised if you get kicked off a car or tank when you try to jack it.

V

Venezuela: Country in South America that's one of the largest producers of petroleum in the world. One of the leading suppliers of oil to the U.S., a founding member of OPEC, and the setting for *MWIF*. Venezuela is also a target of corruption and political strife, so the idea of a sudden, dangerous, and violent upheaval of the government isn't too far off from reality. See also: **characterization, *Killing Pablo, Man on Fire***

T

Tactical bible: System that underlies the choice of weapons and vehicles in *MWIF*. The basic design is a traditional rock-paper-scissors approach, and the tactical bible dictates how all the game items relate to each other. It determines how some helicopters relate to tanks, or how carpet bombs affect infantry but not armor or buildings (while a tank buster fills a gap that the cluster bomb leaves by doing vice versa). See also: **reactivity**

U

Underworld: An implied criminal faction (and locale) in the *MWIF* game world. The previous *Mercenaries* title featured the Russian Mafia as one of the factions, but due to *MWIF*'s location, drug cartels and crime lords are possible stand-ins in this game. You can expect to fight in locations like a drug lord's palace. See also: **freedom, seamless**

W

Weapons running: A type of mission where you load up a truck with weapons and transport them from Point A to Point B. A subtle demonstration of the physics engine, as the weapons realistically roll in the back in response to the truck's movements within the game world. See also: **physics**

> A FULL-ON, NEXT-GENERATION SEQUEL WITH SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS.

X

Xbox 1.5: A concept that the *MWIF* team wants to avoid. *MWIF* is not intended to be a mere port of, or a slight graphical update to, *Mercenaries*—it is a full-on, next-generation sequel with significant improvements. See also: **jump from current gen to next gen**

Y

Yield: Everything seen here is the result of the game running off of nonfinal hardware. When the final dev kits are in Pandemic's hands, the team expects to yield much better results (e.g., more effects, better framerate, less clipping, final animations). See also: **jump from current gen to next gen**

Z

Zounds!: The typical reaction upon seeing Mattias Nilsson destroy an entire oil rig on his own (thanks to his ingenuity with the use of explosives at key structural points) during a demonstration of *Mercenaries: World in Flames* running on a PS3 dev kit.

PS3 GALLERY

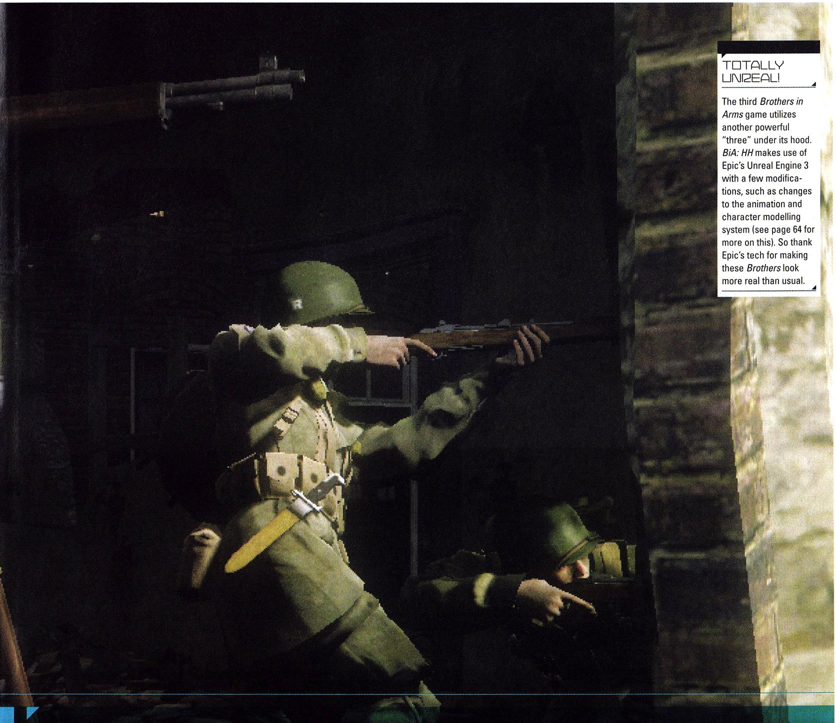
THE FUTURE IS READY

You just read two cover stories on two big PS3 games. Normally, we'd just toss those into the magazine and call it a day. But no, gentle reader, we decided to go the extra mile for this issue. We snagged info on another dozen games that our mighty next-generation platform will be hosting. You'll see some expected sequels, a couple of surprises, and one honest-to-goodness new property. And since these games are all so pretty, we thought, what better way to showcase them than to give you some really big art. It's almost like we took a time machine into the near future and turned what we saw into a museum gallery. Now stop reading this intro and dive in.

PUB. Ubisoft DEV. Gearbox RELEASE Launch

BROTHERS IN ARMS: HELL'S HIGHWAY

THE HIIIIIIIIWAY TO HELL!



TOTALLY UNREAL!

The third *Brothers in Arms* game utilizes another powerful "three" under its hood. *BiA: HH* makes use of Epic's Unreal Engine 3 with a few modifications, such as changes to the animation and character modelling system (see page 64 for more on this). So thank Epic's tech for making these *Brothers* look more real than usual.

We've been simultaneously frustrated and relieved by the existence of the *Brothers in Arms* franchise. Relieved because Gearbox managed to do something new to the WWII genre rather than crank out a copycat WWII shooter where your baddies speak horribly accented German; Gearbox actually combined squad tactics and first-person gunnery into a delicious whole. Frustrated because this fusion works beautifully on the Xbox and PC, but on the PS2, the *BIA* games range from "tried hard, couldn't be done" to "pretty good effort, but not as good as the other platforms"—which is usually because of the PS2's lesser computing power. Well, with the muscular might of the PS3, there's no need to worry about our getting a not-as-good version of a fine franchise.

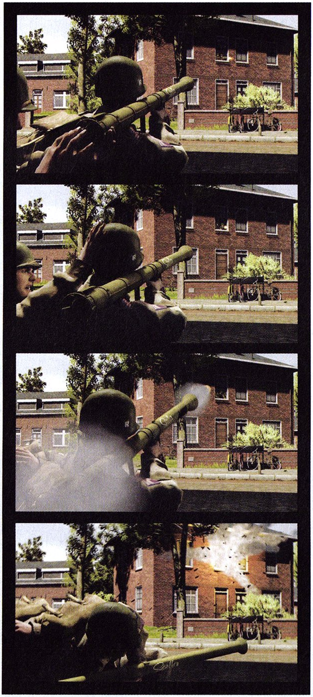
Previous *BIA* games kept you in France, but *BIA3* will be the first to not have you humming "La Marseillaise," as it focuses on Operation Market Garden in the Netherlands. The plan was to drop airborne troops in, have them seize a bunch of bridges, and then march straight into Germany (the titular "Hell's Highway" was the Allies' nickname for Highway 69, which connected Eindhoven to Arnhem). What actually happened was that the Germans stomped all over this plan and won what is considered to be their last great victory in the European theater.

Besides the change of scenery and the portrayal of one of the more brutal periods in the Western part of the war, *BIA3* adds a huge change: a third team. You still command both a fire team and an assault team, but there's now a special team on top of that: It's a flexible team that's dictated by the weapons they're carrying. The machine-gun team has one guy lying prone with a big ol' machine gun while another guy sits down and feeds the ammo belt into the gun. Another special team is the bazooka team, where one guy uses a bazooka to take down armored vehicles and even buildings (also new are destructible environments, which include collapsing buildings and wood that splinters and breaks under fire) while the others protect and load the bazooka. Similarly, there's also a mortar team, which we

BIA3 ADDS A HUGE CHANGE: A THIRD TEAM, WHICH IS THE SPECIAL TEAM.

BUILDING GO BOOM-BOOM

The *Highway to Hell* team echoed something that has been said by a lot of PS3 developers (such as the Pandemic guys for *Mercenaries*, the Sony online crew for *Dark Kingdom,* and the Koei crew for *Fatal Inertia*): that physics can now be used in a proper fashion for PS3 gaming. Not only do materials have distinct properties (hence, wood-based cover is very easy to destroy while sturdy concrete cover will last), but physics will allow for more spectacular destruction of buildings. Hence the introduction of the bazooka team, and said team's ability to tear out chunks of buildings, as seen here. Gearbox president Randy Pitchford admitted that, due to technology limitations of past generations, you could basically find cover and stay put without much worry. Now, with the power of next-generation hardware, both the player and the enemy AI have to consider the destructibility of the environment. That not only can wooden items be obliterated, but that even hardened areas such as bunkers and vehicles can be taken down when enough force (i.e., a freaking bazooka) is applied to it. Pitchford even commented that *Highway to Hell* level designers do a test run-through of their level with the assumption that most of the buildings are destroyed, to make sure the game doesn't break when the player goes all kinds of crazy with his bazooka team.



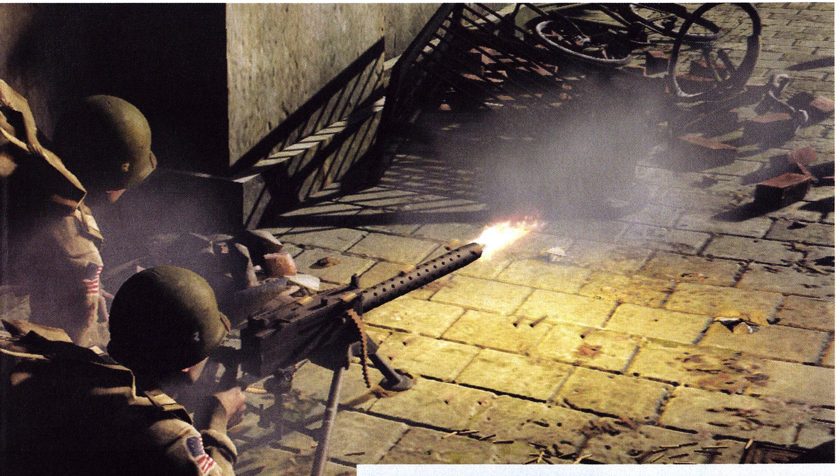
assume can be used for indirect, medium-range artillery fire to soften up the enemy before you send in your normal fire and assault teams. Finally, there's a radio team, where the radio operator can call in powerful air strikes (sounds a bit like a huskier version of the mortar team) for you.

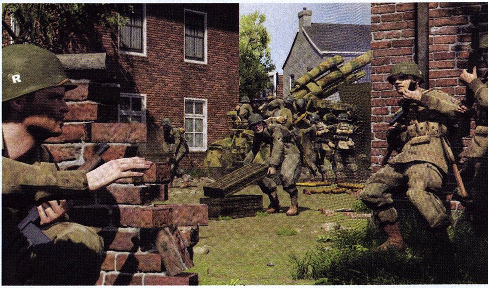
Those are the major changes to the franchise, but thanks to the power of the PS3, there are several new little details that aren't doable on current systems. One is that you're no longer just a floating arm with a gun—your character is fully modeled and animated. So, on occasion, you'll see your hands moving around, and when you look down, you can actually see your legs and feet. Hop over a fence, and you'll see your hand steadying your body before your legs do the, er, legwork. Heck, you can even look down at your chest to check how many grenades you have left. Other tweaks include better indicators of what the AI is thinking (you can look at the way a soldier carries his gun, the way he moves his head, and so forth to see how alert he is) and the total lack of load times (once you start the game, you never see a loading screen again).

So what about some PS3-specific stuff? When we ask Gearbox president Randy Pitchford about the team's plans for use of the hard drive, he replies, "Gearbox has traditionally been a multiplatform developer, and that means that using a hard drive is not new science for us—we've had one on the Xbox for the entire last generation. So, while many [PlayStation 3] developers are going to start having to think about how to use the hard drive for the first time, we're really in the second generation of this concept," he explains.

> THE IDEA THAT THE VALUE OF THE GAME WILL KEEP INCREASING IS KEY.

"The hard drive will improve the user experience in a lot of ways," he continues, "but I think the most exciting thing that PlayStation 3 gamers are going to get to experience is the benefit of Gearbox's commitment to postlaunch support. Every game we've



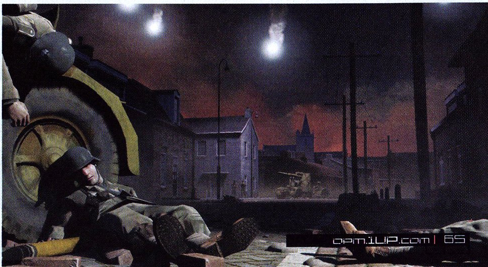


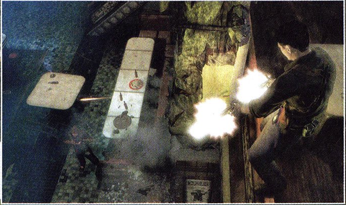
ever done has had either modification capability or bonus content that has been released to customers on an ongoing basis. I think that the idea that the value of the game will keep increasing after you've bought it is a really important thing for Sony gamers to start getting used to."

When asked about jumping from current- to next-gen development, Pitchford muses, "The next generation brings new capability across the board for the game. I think about all of the new things we can simulate, and I get even more excited—from a bigger squad with more impressive assets like mortar teams and bazooka teams to larger battlefields that are authentic recreations of true history," he says. "The character animation and AI simulation is getting an order of magnitude more power behind it, and the physics simulation just buries what we did in the last generation.

Pitchford concludes, "When we wrap all of this in a high-fidelity, high-definition experience, we really couldn't be happier with what the PlayStation 3 is doing for us and what we're doing with it."

We're glad to hear that.

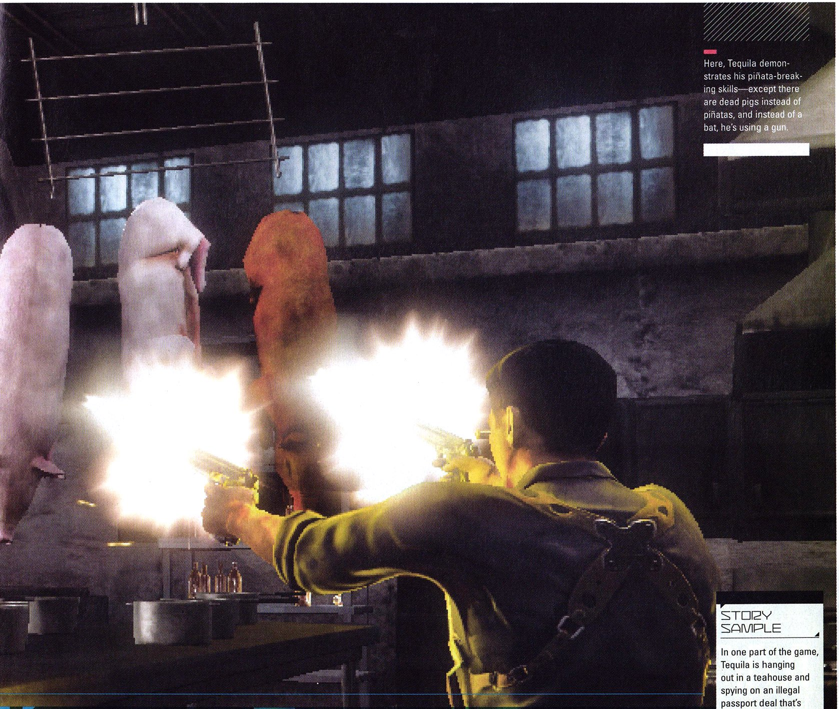




PUB. Midway **DEV.** Midway **RELEASE** Launch

STRANGLEHOLD

GAMES IMITATING ART



Here, Tequila demonstrates his piñata-breaking skills—except there are dead pigs instead of piñatas, and instead of a bat, he's using a gun.

We know that the PlayStation 3 is more powerful than the PS2, but just what will that mean besides better-looking games? *Stranglehold* producer Alex Offermann explains: "With more memory and performance, you get the possibility [of doing] multiple things at the same time. In the past, when you had three heavy systems like physics, AI, and rendering going on at the same time, you always had to cut back on one or two in order to fit in memory or run at a decent framerate. But next gen allows you to take all three of these features to new heights without impacting each other as much."

One of the side effects that will come from being able to make more realistic games is that developers can increasingly focus on how to mirror aspects of movies. The *Stranglehold* team has an advantage, since two of the game's primary collaborators, director John Woo and action star Chow Yun-Fat, are no strangers to film.

While Woo's primary role in the game has been directing cut-scenes, his influence will be felt in other parts of the game as well. He's been advising the development team on how to make the gameplay more dramatic by changing how encounters between characters occur and giving tips on things like camera perspective. In order to add a more stylized component to the game, players will gain points for good combinations, which can then be spent on special combos such as the Tequila Bomb, a spinning cartwheel attack that takes out all characters within targeting range. Main game star Chow Yun-Fat has also assisted the team; in addition to providing a 3D body scan, he also allowed the developers to take close-up shots of his face to provide a wide range of unposed expressions, allowing the team to match his facial movements with his dialogue.

> WOO HAS BEEN ADVISING HOW TO MAKE THE GAMEPLAY MORE DRAMATIC.

One of the direct results of the movie influences is that the game seems like it will be fairly linear—much like a movie—rather than open-ended. Which we're okay with—after all, who doesn't want to be a movie star?

STORY SAMPLE

In one part of the game, Tequila is hanging out in a teahouse and spying on an illegal passport deal that's taking place between two gangsters. One of the gangsters spots him and opens fire; half of the teahouse patrons clear out, while the other half draw their guns to join the battle. After diving behind bars, hiding behind pillars, and sliding down staircases in his shootout with the thugs, Tequila stumbles into a boss battle with one of the gang's overlords— who just happens to bring along his rocket launcher.

PUB. Activision DEV. Raven Software RELEASE Launch

MARVEL: ULTIMATE ALLIANCE

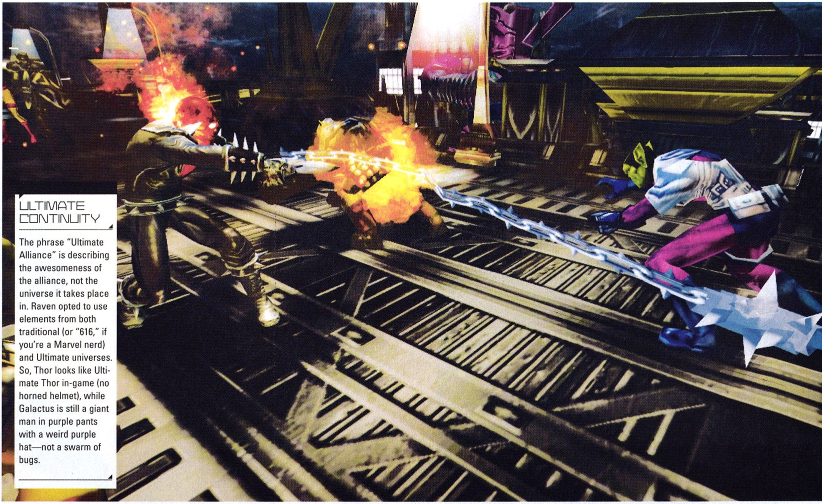
ACTION-RPG-ERS, ASSEMBLE!

Make mine Marvel! At an Activision press event staged last year to unveil *X-Men Legends II: Rise of Apocalypse* (4.5/5 in *OPM* Issue #99), the *OPM* crew wondered aloud if the next game in the series oughn't be *Marvel Legends,* something that would bring all the greatest heroes of the Marvel universe together. Activision's answer was a very telling, "You never know."

Well, now we know. Activision, along with *Legends* series creator Raven Software, is supersizing on the PS3 with *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance,* an action-RPG that tops the hero scale at 140 total characters. In a virtual Who's Who of Marveldom, you'll play in teams with the likes of Captain America, Thor, Spider-Man, Wolverine, Elektra, Nick Fury, the Thing, Ghost Rider, and even the Silver Surfer in a story that pits you against Dr. Doom and his newly formed Masters of Evil (to clarify, the bad guys are not playable).

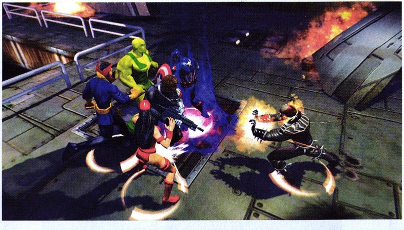
At first blush, *MUA* appears to play exactly like the *X-Men Legends* games. In a three-quarter third-person perspective, you'll lead your four-member band from one mission-based chapter to the next, fighting wads of enemies and the occasional boss. You can switch heroes on the fly; each character will power up RPG-style as you progress. This basic beat-the-minions/beat-the-boss formula has been nicely polished in the prior *Legends* games, and it's practical to keep the system in place for the next-gen offering.

How *Ultimate Alliance* parts from and improves upon prior *Legends* games is mostly evolutionary relative to the PS3. Gone is the cartoonish cel shading, replaced with more straightforward 3D graphics. *Ultimate Alliance*'s far larger character capacity means a potentially greater variety of teams and foes, and the obvious graphical power means more open environments (the



ULTIMATE CONTINUITY

The phrase "Ultimate Alliance" is describing the awesomeness of the alliance, not the universe it takes place in. Raven opted to use elements from both traditional (or "616," if you're a Marvel nerd) and Ultimate universes. So, Thor looks like Ultimate Thor in-game (no horned helmet), while Galactus is still a giant man in purple pants with a weird purple hat—not a swarm of bugs.



Legends games tended to be a little claustrophobic) with a wider sense of scope: The opening level alone finds you on S.H.I.E.L.D.'s Helicarrier, thousands of feet in the air. Other revealed locales (there'll be 17 in total) include Atlantis and the Skrull homeworld. And watch for a particularly intense boss fight with none other than the mighty (and the mighty big) Galactus himself.

MUA will certainly benefit from the PS3's expanded online capabilities, but, so far, Activision is being quiet on the multiplayer front, only saying that online modes will be cooperative and that you'll be able to import powered-up characters from the single-player game. Also, no word yet on if, or how, the PS3's hard drive will be used, though we're betting there will be downloadable missions and characters. We're definitely crossing our fingers at the prospect of being able to download Dazzler and Darkhawk.

PUB Sega DEV Sonic Team RELEASE Launch

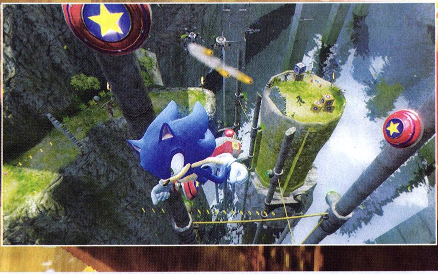
SONIC
THE HEDGEHOG
A SONIC ADVENTURE REINVENTED

Though the quality of the past few *Sonic the Hedgehog* games has been rather suspect, the popularity of Sega's once-proud mascot remains, which has given Sonic Team ample reason to get to work on a next-generation adventure featuring Sonic and some new friends. "We want players to experience the impact Sonic made 15 years ago; we also wanted to include the history of Sonic, like *Sonic Heroes* and *Sonic Adventure*," says Shun Nakamura, creative producer at Sonic Team. "This product lets Sonic fans reexperience the 15 years of history, while delivering to them an entirely new sense of speed, adventure, and life to the game."

Indeed, Sonic Team plans to harness the power of the PS3 in order to make Sonic seem faster than ever before which, in tandem with the improvements to the animation and sound, should make for one of the richest *Sonic* experiences yet. As for actual gameplay, Nakamura stressed that the PS3 version will retain some of the features found in previous *Sonic* titles.

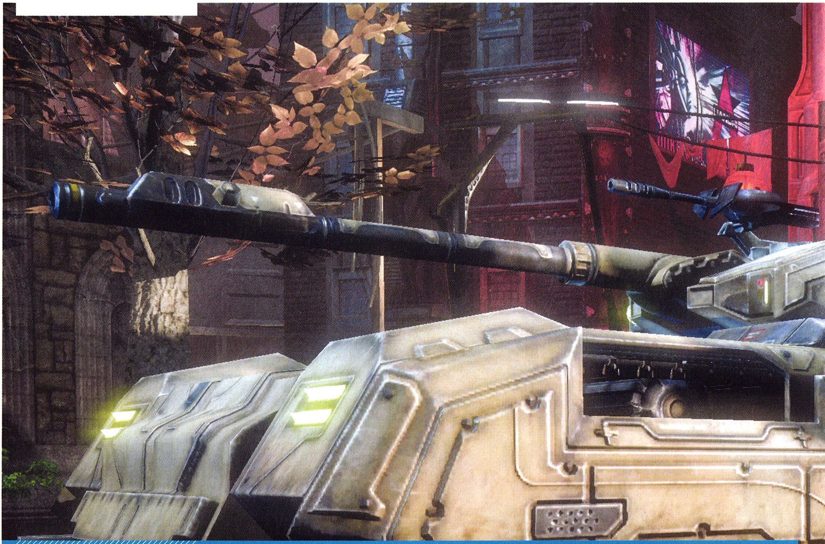
> "WE WANT PLAYERS TO EXPERIENCE THE IMPACT SONIC MADE 15 YEARS AGO."

"The game takes place in two different stages: the action stage and the town stage. The town stage is completely different from the traditional action stage where Sonic moves through the environment at his signature breakneck speed; by going back and forth inside a large map, gamers will be completing various missions that will introduce them to entirely new gameplay experiences from the previous *Sonic* series," Nakamura explains. "The action stage features vast, deep environments for Sonic to show off his newly defined speed!"



FRIENDLY FURRIES

Once again, Sonic will be battling the forces of Dr. "Eggman" Robotnik in the lagoon city of Soleana. And, like the previous games, he'll have some help. Some familiar faces will return, but the game will also feature the debut of an entirely new character, Silver. While there aren't many details on this newcomer or his role in the game, Nakamura insists that "he's a very cool character."



PUB. Midway DEV. Epic Games RELEASE Launch

UNREAL TOURNAMENT 2007

WHERE UNREAL FINALLY BECOMES REAL

While the version of *Unreal Tournament* that came to the PS2 in 2002 included the excellent bot AI that the series is known for, it was difficult for gamers to get too excited about a single-player-only version of a game that PC and Xbox gamers got to play online. In addition, the series' usually stellar graphics just weren't as pretty on the PS2 as they were on other platforms.

That won't be the case with *Unreal Tournament 2007*, however. Thanks to Sony's recent announcement of a new, more unified online strategy for this generation, gamers will have no problem hopping online to play against their friends. And if they choose not to, they won't have to take their chances on playing against strangers. Producer Jeff Morris tells us, "You can also fill out online multiplayer games with bots—so if you and a friend want to play *UT2007* online with three other AI teammates, you can. Our AI opponents are designed to feel like real human opponents."

> "OUR AI OPPONENTS ARE DESIGNED TO FEEL LIKE REAL HUMAN OPPONENTS."

The graphical muscle of the PS3 (which has 16 times the memory of its predecessor) will mean that PlayStation *UT* fans will no longer be stuck with the ugly duckling of the bunch. And when you combine that with Unreal Engine 3, which was developed for the next generation of gaming, you've got a powerful combination. Considering that the series has become almost better known for the game engines that the entries have been built on than anything else (see sidebar), it's no surprise that *UT2007* is expected to be one of the best-looking games of the launch window.

The PS2's online shooter library never boasts many significant players beyond the *SOCOM* series, but *UT2007* looks like it could become a staple of an FPS fan's online diet.

THEY GET OUR MOTORS RUNNING

All told, the various versions of the Unreal Engines have been used to power more than 65 different titles, including games in two signature *Tom Clancy* series, *Splinter Cell* (the multiplayer parts) and *Rainbow Six*. Dozens of studios, including big players like Ubisoft, LucasArts, Vivendi Universal, Namco Bandai, and Sony CEA, have indicated that they will be using the Unreal Engine 3 for upcoming titles. And Epic has said that they are already working on the Unreal Engine 4, which will be used for the *next* next generation.

OPM EXCLUSIVE!

PUB. Namco DEV. Namco Bandai RELEASE Launch

RIDGE RACER 7

ANOTHER PLAYSTATION LAUNCH, ANOTHER RIDGE RACER

The PlayStation 3 launch just wouldn't be the same without a new game in the *Ridge Racer* series to help demonstrate its power. Thankfully, there'll be a new game in the series to greet all of us on launch day, so we spoke with Hideo Teramoto, associate producer on *Ridge Racer 7*, to get the scoop.

OPM What's the most significant change in moving from current gen to next gen?

HIDEO TERAMOTO The transition from a current-gen console to a next-gen console implies that network functionality can now be considered a prerequisite for all titles. Instead of being just an optional feature for hardcore gamers, network play will become a standard component of console gaming. About 12 years ago, when I was still accessing the Internet from my college computer lab, home networking was something that was accessible only for those highly skilled in computing. In principle, using a computer at home did not involve

CUSTOM CARS

One of the big new features in *Ridge Racer 7* gives you the ability to customize your car more than ever before. In fact, there are up to 20,000 different ways, which should provide for some interesting racing moments when you take your customized car online. But don't worry; while there's more customization, the game remains true to its arcade roots.

connecting to other computers at all. However, networking on computers has become standard and is a part of daily life.

OPM How will *Ridge Racer* take advantage of a hard drive?

HT We were all quite surprised when first approached about the hard drive. To be honest, we still do not have any concrete ideas we feel comfortable with discussing. However, compared to disc media, where it is necessary to have the contents fixed at the time we submit the master, a hard drive would allow for more flexibility in that changes can be readily made. I believe this is one of the advantages of the hard drive. In addition, the freedom involved in changing elements via a network or customization according to the player's preferences will be an advantage for a title such as *Ridge Racer*.

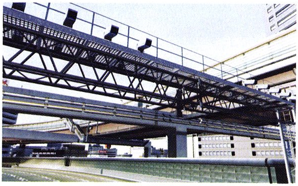
OPM Can you talk about any plans for online play?

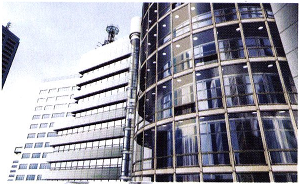
HT There are many *Ridge Racer* fans all over the world, so our aim is to create a game where these players can race against each other without boundaries or time constraints. This is made possible with a network connection, and we have been working very closely with [Sony Computer Entertainment's] technical staff to deliver this experience. I can't go into much detail about the specs, but I can say that more than 10 players will be able to participate in races, and there will also be a new co-op mode for players to enjoy.

> "MORE THAN 10 PLAYERS WILL BE ABLE TO PARTICIPATE IN ONLINE RACES...."

OPM *Ridge Racer* has a pedigree of being the PlayStation launch title that future games should match—how do you maintain that?

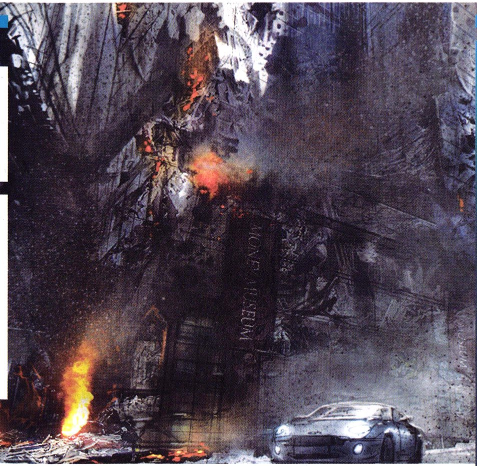
HT Sony's vision of the future is similar to our vision for the *Ridge Racer* series. All our *Ridge Racer* games were designed to utilize new technology; the PS1 introduced the use of polygons, the PS2 produced visuals with DVD clarity, and the PSP has graphical/sound abilities similar to [those of] the PS2 with wireless play. We were lucky that Sony [was] able to provide us with this technology at the right time. With it, we have been able to produce great games that use the technology of the hardware to its full potential. At the moment, we are concentrating on understanding the architecture of the PS3's network functions and Cell processor.





WAIT, I'VE SEEN YOU

Does the front of this building look familiar? It should, if you're a *Ridge Racer* fan. It's kind of a landmark in the *Ridge Racer* games, since it's appeared in nearly all of them. Whereas the windows were just textures in the previous games, they're now full polygonal models, complete with scaffolding—only with the power of the PlayStation 3, indeed.



PUB Sega DEV. Pseudo Interactive RELEASE Launch

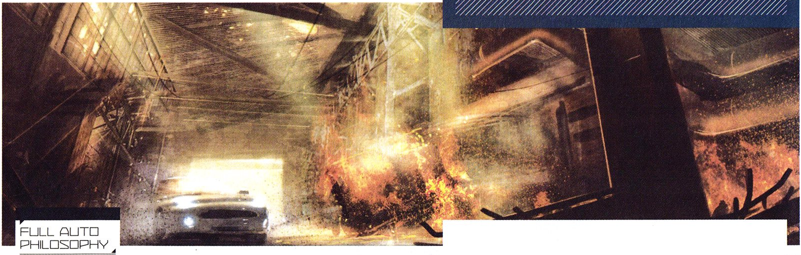
FULL AUTO 2: BATTLELINES

CARS AND SHOOTING OF STUFF!

Everyone likes cars. Everyone likes explosions. Everyone likes it when cars explode, so why not put all of that in a game? That's the very same question Sega asked itself, and the result is *Full Auto 2: Battlelines*, the sequel to the original Xbox 360 game.

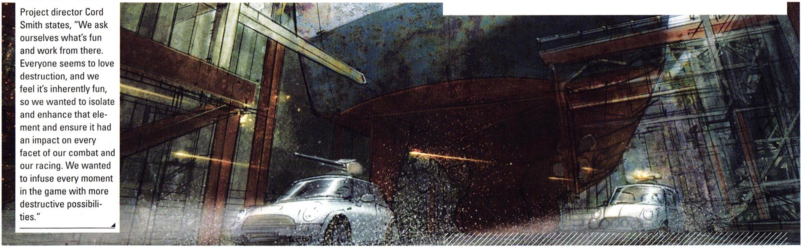
Much like its predecessor, *Full Auto 2* will feature much in the way of vehicular combat, including a single-player career mode where you can load up on new weapons and cars while attempting to gain control of the city of Staunton's six districts. Of course, there are also multiplayer modes with such adrenaline-inducing names as Base Assault and Team Deathmatch.

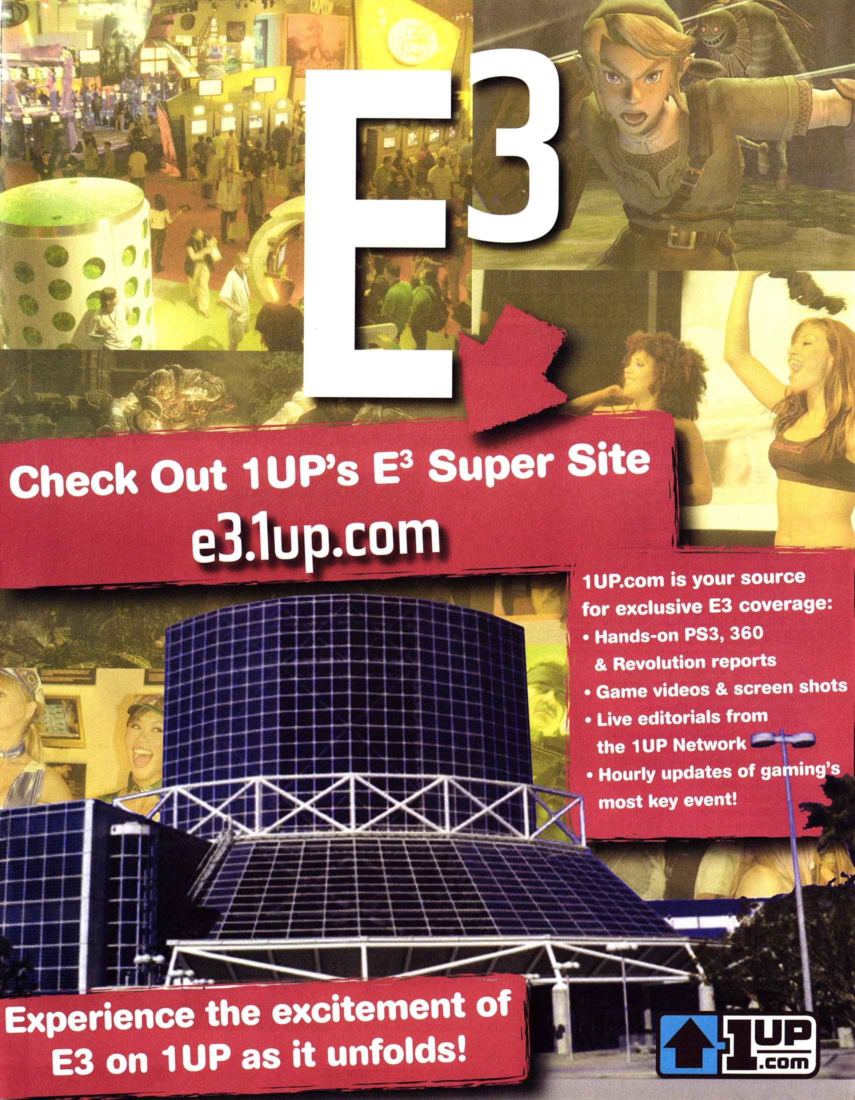
But the marquee feature of *Full Auto*—and now, its sequel—is the Unwreck function, which lets you rewind time when you get into a severe accident. The game isn't quite ready to be shown off on the PS3 quite yet, but we've got some art that gives a glimpse of the look and feel that the team's aiming for. All of this is just so extreme-sounding that it makes us want to drink Mountain Dew and play *Sonic Riders*.



FULL AUTO PHILOSOPHY

Project director Cord Smith states, "We ask ourselves what's fun and work from there. Everyone seems to love destruction, and we feel it's inherently fun, so we wanted to isolate and enhance that element and ensure it had an impact on every facet of our combat and our racing. We wanted to infuse every moment in the game with more destructive possibilities."





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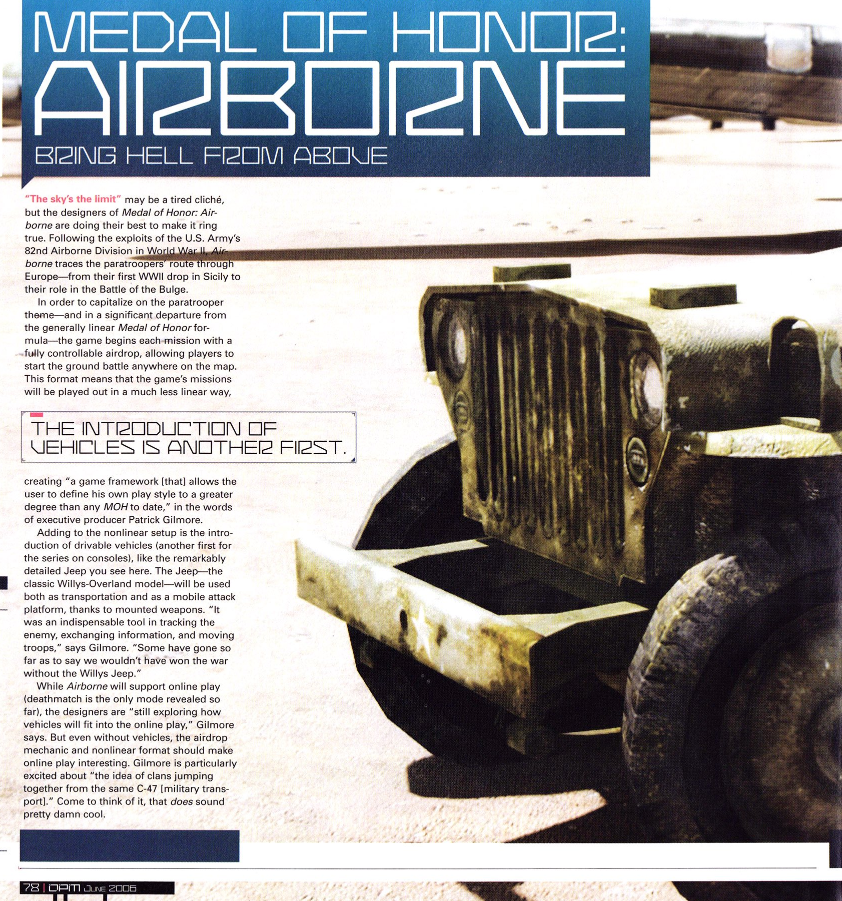
OPM
EXCLUSIVE!

PUB EA Games DEV. EA Los Angeles RELEASE Launch

MEDAL OF HONOR: AIRBORNE

BRING HELL FROM ABOVE



"The sky's the limit" may be a tired cliché, but the designers of *Medal of Honor: Airborne* are doing their best to make it ring true. Following the exploits of the U.S. Army's 82nd Airborne Division in World War II, *Airborne* traces the paratroopers' route through Europe—from their first WWII drop in Sicily to their role in the Battle of the Bulge.

In order to capitalize on the paratrooper theme—and in a significant departure from the generally linear *Medal of Honor* formula—the game begins each mission with a fully controllable airdrop, allowing players to start the ground battle anywhere on the map. This format means that the game's missions will be played out in a much less linear way, creating "a game framework [that] allows the user to define his own play style to a greater degree than any *MOH* to date," in the words of executive producer Patrick Gilmore.

THE INTRODUCTION OF VEHICLES IS ANOTHER FIRST.

Adding to the nonlinear setup is the introduction of drivable vehicles (another first for the series on consoles), like the remarkably detailed Jeep you see here. The Jeep—the classic Willys-Overland model—will be used both as transportation and as a mobile attack platform, thanks to mounted weapons. "It was an indispensable tool in tracking the enemy, exchanging information, and moving troops," says Gilmore. "Some have gone so far as to say we wouldn't have won the war without the Willys Jeep."

While *Airborne* will support online play (deathmatch is the only mode revealed so far), the designers are "still exploring how vehicles will fit into the online play," Gilmore says. But even without vehicles, the airdrop mechanic and nonlinear format should make online play interesting. Gilmore is particularly excited about "the idea of clans jumping together from the same C-47 [military transport]." Come to think of it, that *does* sound pretty damn cool.

BEEP BEEP

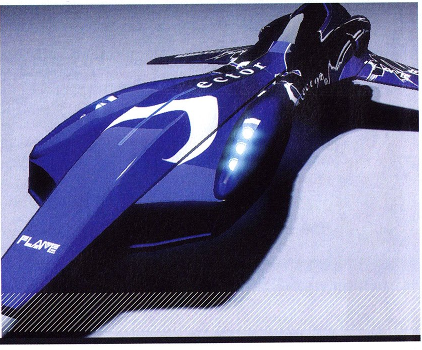
Just how significant is the Jeep in *MOH: A*? Well, there will be a Jeep in every mission. Additionally, there will be significant driving sequences for Operations Husky, Neptune, and Varsity in particular. Members of the *MOH: A* team went out and dug up some old-school Jeeps to get a handle on how they drive. Besides the Jeep, you'll also find the very German-sounding Kübelwagen.

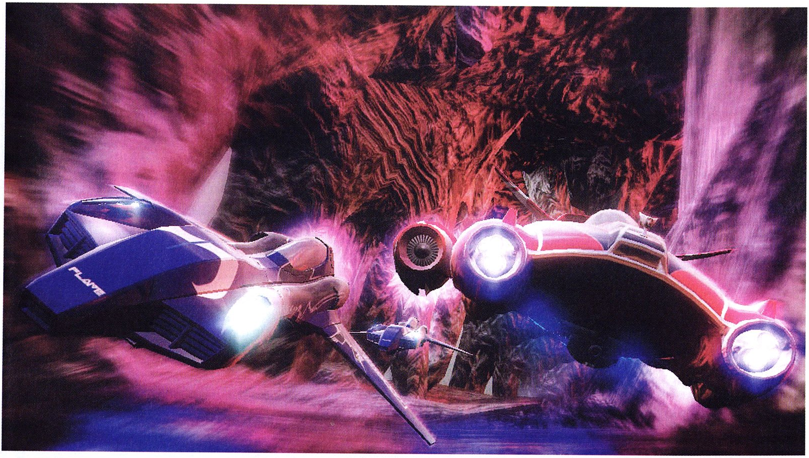
PUB. Koei DEV. Koei Canada RELEASE Launch

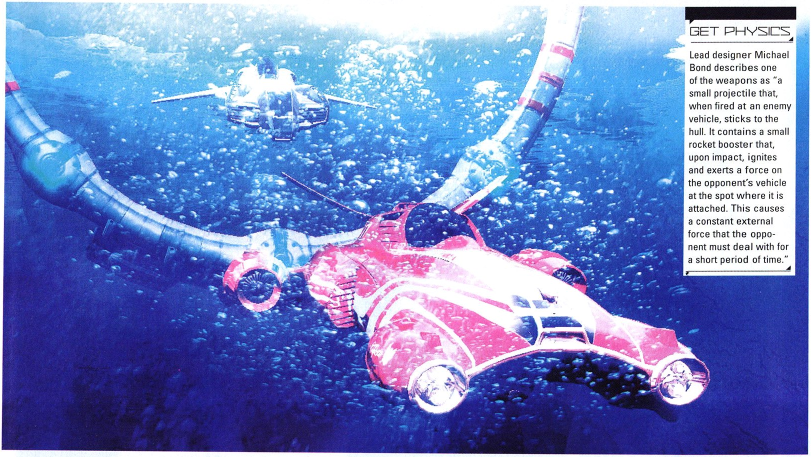
FATAL INERTIA

STAR WARS PODRACING MEETS WIPEOUT

Just one look at *Fatal Inertia* will make you think of the podracing sequence from *Star Wars: Episode I*, though we're pretty sure developer/publisher Koei prefers you focus on the game's speed, variety of environments (including canyons, glaciers, and jungles), and sheer intense thrill of a futuristic, real-physics combat racer rife with online multiplayer modes. The development team really likes to emphasize the physics behind the game, which does things like alter the track (e.g., giant chunks of track get blown off via weapons) and allow for weapons that mess with the physics properties of other racers (such as affecting their weight, momentum, and even velocity). Hey, at least this isn't *Dynasty Warriors Racing*.

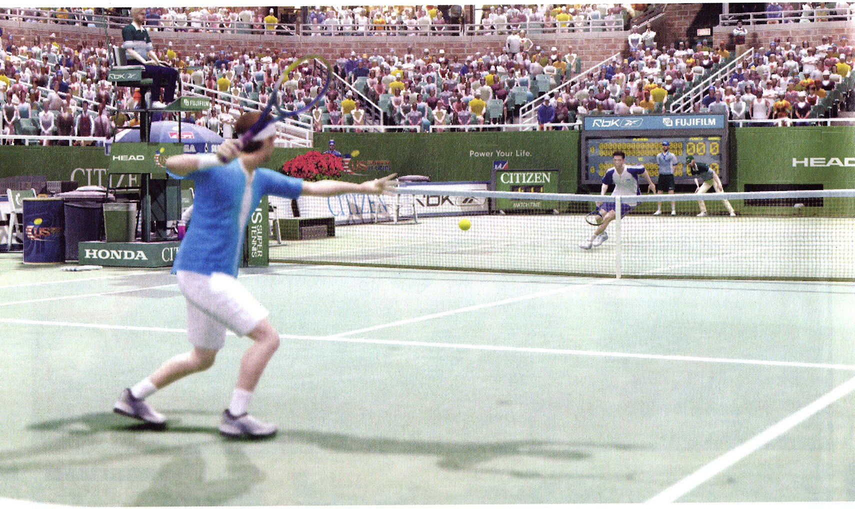






GET PHYSICS

Lead designer Michael Bond describes one of the weapons as "a small projectile that, when fired at an enemy vehicle, sticks to the hull. It contains a small rocket booster that, upon impact, ignites and exerts a force on the opponent's vehicle at the spot where it is attached. This causes a constant external force that the opponent must deal with for a short period of time."

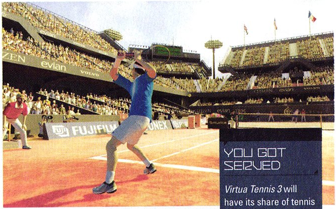

FUJIFILM
Rbk
FUJIFILM
HEAD
Power Your Life.
CITIZEN
HEAD
HONDA
SUPER TENNIS

PUB. Sega DEV. Sega RELEASE TBA

VIRTUA TENNIS 3

YOUR GUESS IS AS GOOD AS OURS

The *Virtua Tennis* series has graced only one Sony platform before (with last year's *Virtua Tennis: World Tour* for the PSP), but Sega's already eyeing the next generation. And by reading that sentence and looking at these pictures, you now know exactly as much as we do about this game. But hey, look at those great lighting and focus effects! No doubt the PS3 will allow for painstaking simulation of ball and net physics...but considering that *Virtua Tennis* has always been about pure arcadey fun, we couldn't care less. We're just looking forward to seeing it on a bigger screen.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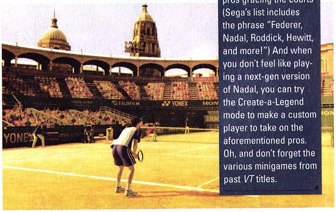
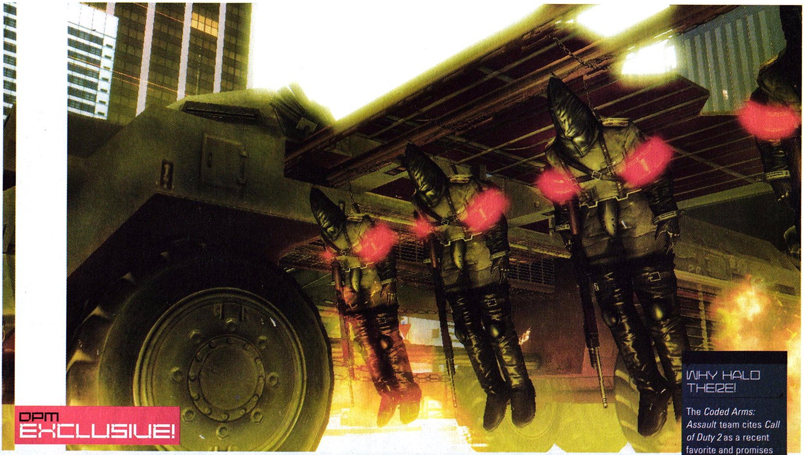

FUJIFILM
YONEX
YONEX

YOU GOT SERVED

Virtua Tennis 3 will have its share of tennis pros gracing the courts (Sega's list includes the phrase "Federer, Nadal, Roddick, Hewitt, and more!") And when you don't feel like playing a next-gen version of Nadal, you can try the Create-a-Legend mode to make a custom player to take on the aforementioned pros. Oh, and don't forget the various minigames from past *VT* titles.



OPM EXCLUSIVE!

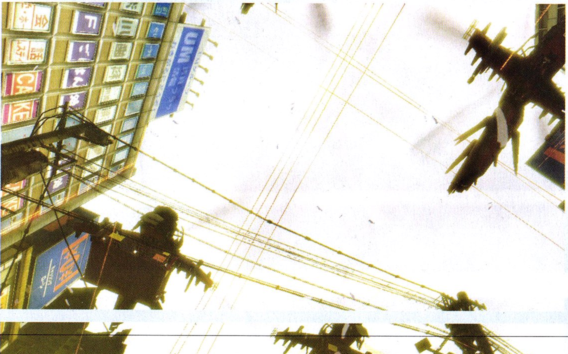
WHY HALO THERE!

The *Coded Arms: Assault* team cites *Call of Duty 2* as a recent favorite and promises to make *Assault* a full-fledged shooter à la *Halo*, complete with vehicles and destructible environments.

PUB. Konami DEV. Konami RELEASE Launch

CODED ARMS: ASSAULT

DON'T HUG YOUR KIDS WITH THESE



That *Coded Arms'* first system was the PSP always seemed like a clerical error. *Coded Arms* is a first-person shooter after all, a genre better suited for the more powerful consoles. The result was that *Coded Arms* came and went quickly.

Now it's back and on the platform it should call home. *Coded Arms: Assault*, which is being built on the Unreal Engine 3, is the sequel to the PSP game. This time, the setting is a virtual world modeled after Tokyo (sounds like *Tron* meets *Lost in Translation*). We're quite amused to see a game revive the whole "virtual reality" shtick again.

OPM EXCLUSIVE!

PUB. Atari DEV. Eden Studios RELEASE 2007

ALONE IN THE DARK

WHERE THINGS GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT

Those of you who were still wearing diapers in 1992 might not remember the release of the original *Alone in the Dark*, which is commonly considered the pioneer of the survival-horror genre. But your ignorance doesn't change the fact that it paved the way for series like *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill*, which drew on the dark undertones of that first game.

While the original series borrowed liberally from the writings of H.P. Lovecraft and were set in kind of a pseudoVictorian era, the new game, which is being developed by Eden Games, has contemporized the setting and made protagonist Edward Carnby younger. Game director David Nadal says, "The first *Alone in the Dark* is the game that had the most impact on me, and I want to recreate that impact for the next generation of gamers."

The big move that developer Eden Games is going to make with this new entry in the series is that they want to structure the game in a similar manner to television series like *24* or *Alias*. Nadal tells us, "The game will have something that we're really excited about—episodic content completely structured to the gameplay, that will have things like 'previously on *Alone in the Dark*' and 'coming next' to remind the player what they have been doing and hint at what's coming up next."

Though Nadal couldn't comment on specific online plans, he did allude to the possibility of downloadable content: "We hope can build up a community spirit around this with people excitedly talking about which episode they're playing, or have played—or what's going to be in future downloadable episodes…." We're all for that—as long as we don't have to wait six months for each new 30-minute episode.

PARADISE LOST

The game was originally planned as a companion to the *Alone in the Dark* film, a Uwe Boll–directed piece of dreck starring Christian Slater and Tara Reid. Fortunately for all of us, development was put on hiatus at the time. While it's still unclear whether the plot of the game has any residual tie-ins with the movie, we'll at least be spared a virtual Tara Reid character.

PUB. **Square Enix** DEV. **Square Enix** RELEASE **Fall**

FINAL FANTASY XII

ONE-TWELFTH OF A GROSS OF FINAL FANTASY GOODNESS

Delays, defections, even a new director...for a while there, we were a little worried that *Final Fantasy XII*'s troubled development history would get the best of it. Happily, our fears were quelled when a copy of the Japanese release landed in our hands—it's a new direction for *Final Fantasy*, but it plays as nicely as it looks. And it looks really, *really* nice. Why should *FFXII* be at the top of your shopping list when it arrives in the U.S. this fall? Here are 12 reasons.

1. MEDIEVAL EYE CANDY

Long ago, Square Enix announced that *FFXII*'s graphics would use half the polygons of *FFX*'s. But poly count ain't everything; all that extra memory has been put into texture graphics, making this, quite simply, the most gorgeous game on the PS2. Every nook and corner is imbued with the sweeping grandeur and insane detail of artist Akihiko Yoshida's paintings. If not for the PS2's jaggy edges, this would put a lot of next-gen games to shame. (Tip: Buy a drool guard to keep your controller dry.)

2. PLAY YOUR WAY

FFXII's promise of AI-controlled combat parties has been the source of heartache for fans who fear the radical move away from menu-driven battles means the end of *Final Fantasy* as they know and love it. But you *can* use menus to direct your teammates. Or you can let them fight on their own. You can crank up the speed to be lightning-fast, or you can make it slow and thoughtful. Menus can freeze the action, or battles can proceed even while you're making decisions. However you want to play *FFXII*, the possibility is there (just as long as you don't want random battles).

3. NOTHING RANDOM

If you've ever played an RPG, you know the feeling too well. The action freezes, the screen dissolves, the music changes, and 15 seconds later you're finally allowed to input commands. Fight, victory, fanfare. Repeat until you puke. But there's none of that here; *FFXII*'s battles are seamless. Fights are quick, smooth, and painless—a natural extension of exploration. This reduces the tedium of roleplaying without minimizing the sweet, sweet mayhem of combat.

4. IT'S A CUSTOM WORLD AFTER ALL

It's not just combat that can be adjusted to your every whim. All six of your party members can learn *any* skill and equip *any* weapon as long as you activate the appropriate space on the License Board, a totally open-ended and new take on *FFX*'s Sphere Grid. But your characters aren't blank slates: Each one has certain innate specialties, so it's not a bad idea to equip, say, nimble Panelo with daggers (her attack power is based on speed rather than strength). And each character has a completely different set of "Mist Knacks" for some good old-fashioned Limit Break-style mayhem.

5. A WILD GAMBIT

Want to let your party decide for themselves how to fight? Set them loose with Gambits, *FFXII*'s most intriguing innovation: They allow you to define your characters' behavior without being forced to micromanage each move. Want to tell them to attack the strongest enemies but pause to heal an ally whose HP has gone critical? To cast magic to soften up high-HP foes before laying into them with cold steel? To focus entirely on preventing status afflictions? Gambits allow you to set all these strategies and thousands more. You don't have to make the most of Gambits to win...but when you do, *FFXII*'s true depth shines through.

6. THE OFFLINE TACTICAL MMO

FFXII draws inspiration from the series' more offbeat chapters. The free-form battle system feels a lot like *Final Fantasy XI*'s, while Gambits offer the strategy of *Final Fantasy Tactics*. Bonus for *FFT* nuts: It's possible to make your character into a Calculator, Mediator, or Poacher...skills previously seen only in the tactical spin-offs.

7. AN EPOCH OF EPICS

FFXII's plot deals in the power-hungry empires and magical relics common to the series, but the presentation goes a step above and beyond anything *FF*'s already high standards. There's more dignity, more subtlety, and a lot more behind-the-scenes intrigue than we've come to expect. And that's a good thing.

8. VAAN - PRETTY MUCH OPTIONAL

Sick of prissy-looking *FF* heroes who spend more time primping their hair than practicing swordplay? Yeah, we are too...but the good news is that pretty-boy main character Vaan is only slightly annoying. And once you put together your full combat roster, he's totally optional in combat.

9. MOOGLES - SUGAR SHOCK

Moogles are everywhere, wearing charming little outfits and generally being adorable. The other nonhuman races aren't too shabby, either...and they're all fully integrated into the culture of Ivalice, a truly diverse fantasy world.

10 TOUGH BUT FAIR

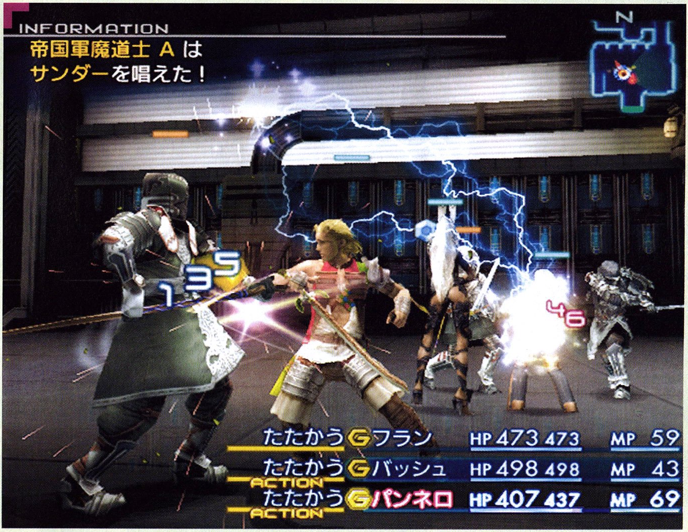
FFXII is much less of a cakewalk than previous games in the series, and you constantly run the risk of encountering a random foe far too powerful for your current party. But you always have a chance to escape, dead party members can be swapped instantly for healthy ones even in the thick of battle, and the game's abundance of skills and strategies can help any clever warrior out of the stickiest situation.

11 HERE COMES THE JUDGE

FFVII's murderous Sephiroth set the standard for villainy, but *FFXII*'s judges make him look like a simpering nancy-boy. Not only do they wear wicked-looking armor, not only do they enforce the Empire's rule with very literal iron fists, but there are *five* of them. Expect to be humbled.

12. AT HEART, IT'S STILL FINAL FANTASY

Still afraid that *FFXII* strays a little too far from the norm to be a true *Final Fantasy*? Don't be. Between its stunning graphics, its epic story, and its intricate depth of gameplay (did we mention the unique monster-hunt side quests? The clan-ranking system? The great characters? The relentless fan service?), this just might be the finest *Fantasy* to date.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46
たたかう Gフラン HP 473 473 MP 59
たたかう Gバッシュ HP 498 498 MP 43
ACTION
たたかう Gパンネロ HP 407 437 MP 69
ACTION

DELAYED FANTASY

Final Fantasy XII was officially announced in November of 2003, which means that they probably started work on it a lot earlier (probably in between the releases of *FFX* and *FFX-2*). Yet, even though it's been delayed more than a year after the anticipated release date, at least it came out. For anyone who thought *FFXII* was in development for too long, they need only look at *Duke Nukem Forever*, which was announced way back in 1997 and still has not been released. That means that in the time between *DNF's* announcement and its theoretically upcoming release, *Final Fantasys VII* through *XII* were developed and shipped.

INFORMATION
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サンダラ 18
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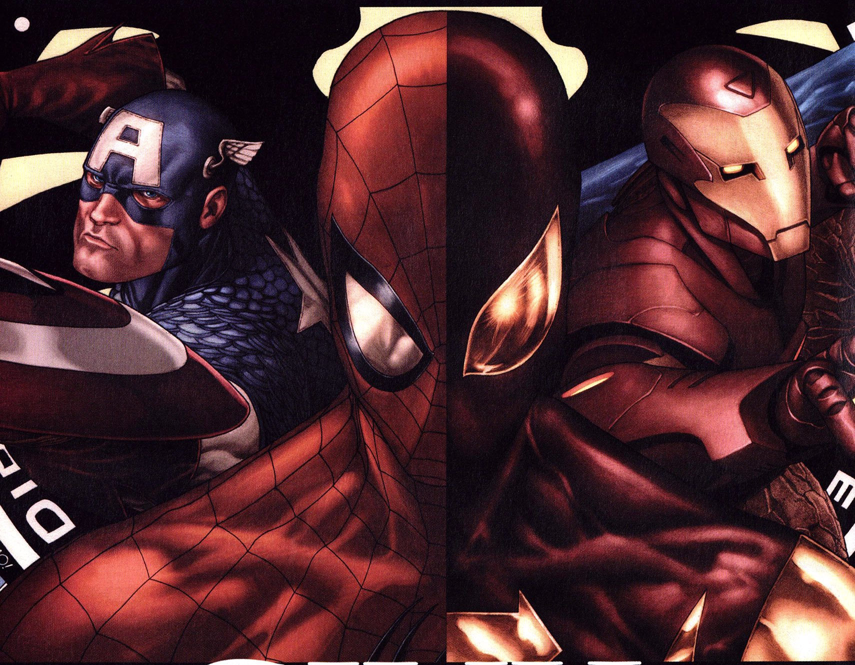

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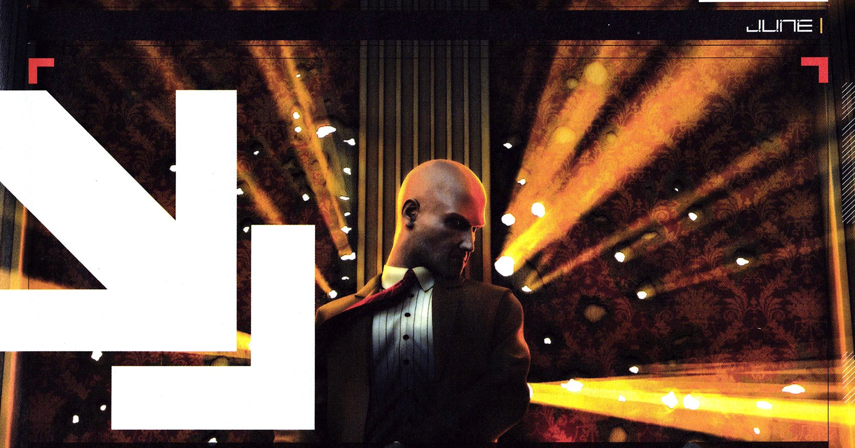

REVIEWS

MAKING THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE, ONE GAME AT A TIME

90

HITMAN: BLOOD MONEY

KILLER JOB

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OFFICIAL U.S. PLAYSTATION MAGAZINE
GAME OF THE MONTH

100

MONSTER HUNTER: FREEDOM

REWARDING PATIENCE

PSP
OFFICIAL U.S. PLAYSTATION MAGAZINE
GAME OF THE MONTH

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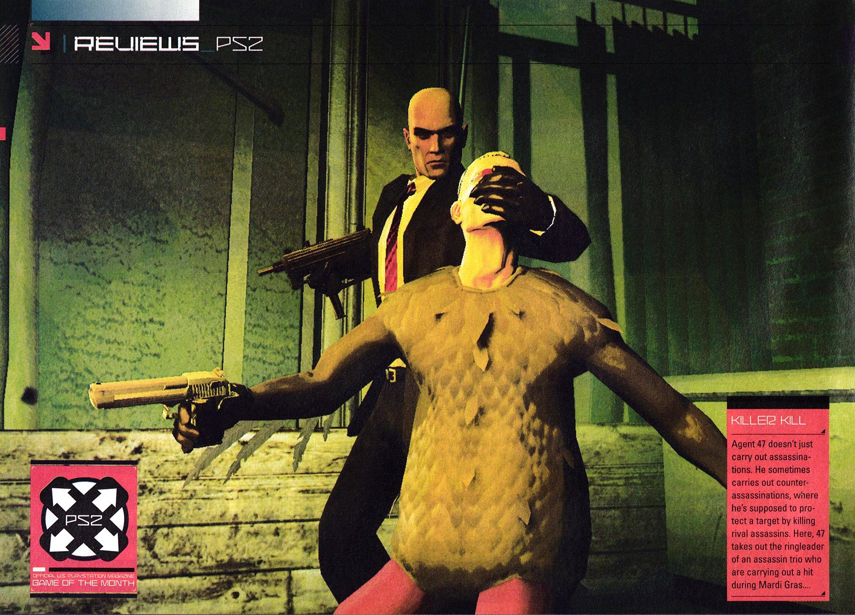
RATING KEY

No more blargs, octagons, or whatever you've called them—now we're sticking with straight-up numbers. And any game that receives five of 'em is something truly special that deserves a spot in your collection. On the other hand, a 2.5 is merely mediocre. And a 0.5? Well...at least they're fun to rip apart.



KILLER KILL

Agent 47 doesn't just carry out assassinations. He sometimes carries out counter-assassinations, where he's supposed to protect a target by killing rival assassins. Here, 47 takes out the ringleader of an assassin trio who are carrying out a hit during Mardi Gras....

PUB. Eidos DEV. IO ESRB M MSRP $49.99

HITMAN: BLOOD

47'S GOT HIS MIND ON HIS MONEY AND HIS MONEY ON HIS MIND...

On paper, the idea that a stealth game that can either be finished in single-digit hours when using the good old "run-n-gun" approach or will require multiple restarts when playing the proper stealthy way sounds pretty bad. Yet the *Hitman* franchise manages to make stealth assassinations seem so smooth and sexy that you don't mind hitting the Restart Level option frequently, just to better pore over the map and the targets and the opportunities. It's the kind of game where you feel merely OK for walking in and shooting someone, but you feel like a slick assassin when you instead arrange the circumstances in order to make the hit look a tragic accident (e.g., making a Jacuzzi fall apart or a barbecue grill explode during a birthday party).

While *Hitman: Silent Assassin* was a huge improvement over the PC-only *Hitman: Code 47*, its successor, *Hitman: Contracts*, felt more like an expansion than a sequel. However, we don't have to worry about the *Hitman* franchise feeling like a sports-game series with incremental updates, as *Hitman: Blood Money* adds three features that make it feel like a real sequel: money, notoriety, and publicity.

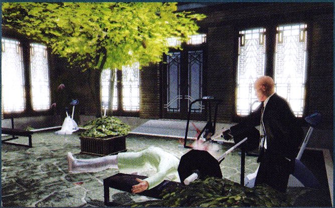
Like past *Hitman* games, *Blood Money* keeps tracks of stats like bullets fired versus hits, bodies discovered, and so on. While previous games merely used those stats to assign a rating (ranging from "psychopath" to "silent assassin"), *Blood Money* uses them to figure out how much money you earn per mission. Not only is this money a scoring mechanic, but you can now spend said money on upgrades for certain weapons. It's pretty cool to take Agent 47's humble silver Baller pistol and add things like silencers, a laser sight, and a scope.

The flip side of having money is that not only can you spend it on bettering your weapons, but you also need to spend it to cover your tracks. The new notoriety system means that if you, er, decided to detonate a mine in a restaurant, taking out 28 people in the process, and you were recorded on a security camera while you were at it, then it'd be harder to use a disguise in the next mission. That is, unless you spend some money to bribe civilians and police in order to lower your notoriety and, therefore, your chance to be recognized. I expected to hate this mechanic, but I found myself trying missions over again to

PACKING THE AREA WITH INNOCENTS MAKES FOR INTERESTING MISSIONS.

FAIR AND BALANCED NEWS

Both the stats and the notoriety are factored into newspaper reports that come up after each mission. The write-up includes facts such as how good a marksman you are (get too trigger-happy, and you're described as "a shooter of limited skill and dangerous enthusiasm"; always hit your mark and you're described as "an exceptional marksman"), how many people died, and even a police sketch (which is determined by your notoriety and how much you spent on bribes).



MONEY

lower my notoriety or, in case I did attract too much attention, to earn enough money to both lower my notoriety and purchase upgrades. If the whole prospect of notoriety is too intimidating to you, the rookie difficulty (another new addition) eliminates it altogether.

The single biggest improvement that *Blood Money* brings to the *Hitman* franchise is the use of high-population areas. Past *Hitman* titles usually had assignments in isolated areas. Sure, on occasion you'd get a mission like taking out a target who's throwing an exclusive party, but for the most part, missions tended to be in places like a private manor or a military base. Now you have missions in places like a casino or even Bourbon Street during Mardi Gras. The tendency to pack the areas with innocents makes for much more interesting missions. It's one thing to pull off a flawless hit in Siberia, but it's another to take out two targets during a visit to a tourist-packed vineyard. The combination of populated locales and creative uses of common objects makes for memorable assassinations. Replace a prop gun with a real one in an opera, and the audience unwittingly witnesses a live execution.

These significant additions, combined with several welcome tweaks (you can hide bodies in large bins! You can actually jump sometimes!), generally make *Blood Money* a damn fine sequel. It's too bad that *Blood Money* makes a huge misstep with its save system. Past games limited the number of saves based on difficulty; *Blood Money* erases those saves when you quit the game. So basically, if my cat were on fire while running around outside, I couldn't save, leave my game, douse my cat, and then come back and resume; I'd have to start the mission from scratch. Also, the AI still needs tuning, as it errs on the side of being too aware of what's going on (get spotted by one guy, and all of his friends—even the ones on the other side of the area—know where you are). Even with these sticking points, *Hitman: Blood Money* still holds a unique place in a genre filled with splintering cells and metal gears. | *Thierry Nguyen*

PROFESSIONAL Addition of money, populated areas, notoriety, upgradeable weapons, well-done missions

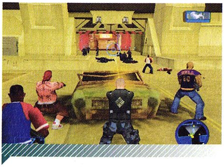
AMATEUR Crap save system, AI still needs a fair bit of tuning

SCORE 4.5

PlayStation
ISSUE 105

WATCH IT NOW!

MOVIE TIME! Pop in the disc and you can pretend you're watching a movie trailer, but without the annoyance of loud popcorn munchers.



STATE OF EMERGENCY 2

A SAD STATE INDEED

| PUB. SouthPeak Interactive DEV. DC Studios
ESRB M MSRP $39.99

Two things come to my mind when I think about playing *State of Emergency 2*. The first is that I'd probably buy it if it were in some sort of dog-chew-toy bargain-bin bucket at the local PetSmart. You know, the kind of bucket where everything inside costs two dollars and is pretty much a piece of crap? (That may sound a little harsh—but hey, sometimes the truth can hurt.)

The second thing *State of Emergency 2* reminds me of is a student film. Not the kind of student film that wins awards at festivals or anything like that. But the kind of student film where a kid in the 6th grade just discovered some new setting on their camera, and they think it's the greatest thing since sliced bread, so they use it on everything they shoot. But all the while, the kid is the only one who thinks this effect or setting is cool, and so the end result is usually crap.

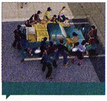
The new setting on the camera for the team that made *State of Emergency 2* is the whole "dozens of people onscreen at once" thing. It was kind of cool in the original game because no developer had really tried to do that before, but ultimately, the hordes of people didn't really affect gameplay all that much. So for this outing, *State of Emergency 2* tries to make the whole crazed-crowd thing a little more dynamic by implementing missions that actually try to follow a story line and objectives.

But guess what? The missions are terrible, thanks in no small part to wonderfully abysmal AI and shooting mechanics that are about as fun as being kicked in the face with soccer cleats—repeatedly.

It's just a veil of mediocrity used to cover what amounts to a crazed-crowd simulator. No, wait—that actually sounds too fun for a game like this. | Giancarlo Varanini

CONS Everything in this game...
CONS ...including the menus

SCORE 1|5



WHAT WOULD'VE MADE THIS BETTER?

Barring an act of God, not much. The original *State of Emergency* had some good parts, because its only unique quality was the fact that it could put so many people onscreen at once. But *State of Emergency 2* doesn't even do that very well. Instead, it tries to be a straight-up action game, so it just totally falls flat.

YO, ROBOT!

If you love robot fighting and happen to live near Eagan, Minnesota, then you should check out Mechwar IX the weekend of May 20. You'll get to watch robots that weigh up to 390 pounds beating the crap out of each other. Cool.

ARMORED CORE: LAST RAVEN

PERFECTLY ENGINEERED TO BORE YOU

| PUB. Agetec DEV. From Software
ESRB E MSRP $29.99

The *Armored Core* developers are celebrating the series' 10th birthday by giving you the same mech game that they've pumped out since the beginning. It's a nice for those who sleep in their anime-mech PJs, but those of you who don't play mech games won't start now. Sure, you get to pilot a sweet Raven robot, but graphically, the game looks like it's from the year 2000. Controls are (still) horrible—trying to aim while jetpacking and strafing will have you wrestling with the controls almost to the point where you're denouncing technology and deciding to go Amish.

As you pilot your Raven around you'll have missions such as "defend this bridge" or "destroy this other mech dude," and the order you play them in determines how the story (in which two groups called the Alliance and the Vertex fight for world dominance) progresses.

But mech games are *really* about building your awesome soldier of the future. You can customize everything on it from the body parts to the paint job. And you'll spend half the game studying the numbers in categories such as weight, energy drain, and buying price, as you ask yourself, "Do I really need a CR-H73E robot head? I *am* on a tight budget." Beginners without past mech experience and/or without a Masters in engineering will get lost in the long list of stats for arm and leg weight, cooling power, and so on, while that level 15 mech owner will bust a nut from sheer joy. You can fight in the arena with other ranked robots while betting some hard-earned cash, but the tired gameplay is like watching *Battlebots* reruns of someone controlling a Roomba with a chain saw.

Next time (because we all know there will be one), the gamemakers need to simplify the customization so gamers aren't decorating their cockpits' interiors and reading charts of numbers. Instead, give us rad-looking robots that shoot cool lasers and have controls that don't feel all rusted out. | James Lee

VERDICT Too much energy consumption with the controls and not enough cooling power for heated tempers.

SCORE 1.5|5

WINBACK 2: PROJECT POSEIDON

YOU'LL WANT TO WIN BACK YOUR LOST TIME

| PUB. Koei DEV. Cavia
ESRB T MSRP $39.99

Winback 2 is one of those "they made a sequel?" sorts of games. The first was a decent duck-and-cover shooter, but no one expected to play a new *Winback* six years later. Alas, *Winback 2* might have felt better if it had come out in, say, 2001.

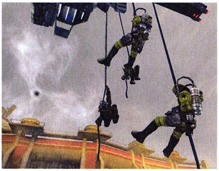
Winback 2 maintains its predecessor's *Time Crisis*–esque use of duck-and-cover gameplay. You're often encouraged to just hug up against walls, couches, columns, and metal boxes for cover and then pop out to shoot bad dudes on occasion.

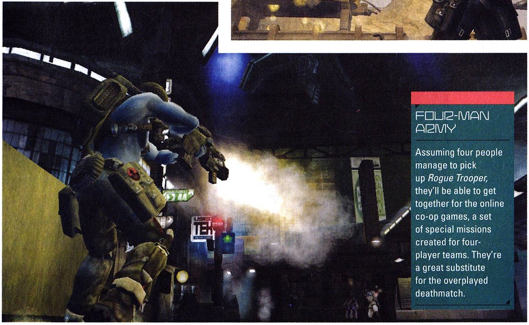
The most drastic change between *Winbacks* is a new cause-and-effect mechanic. Every chapter of a mission is played out in two distinct phases (or "routes"); in each route, you control a different character with a different set of objectives. For example, in route A, you play as Craig and you need to sweep the area of hostiles and disable the security system. In route B, you, as Nick, sweep the other side of the enemy base and rescue hostages. Occasionally, the routes intersect (e.g., Craig and Nick converge on the same room)—what's pretty slick is that the game remembers what you did in route A, and that usually affects events in route B. More games with multiple characters should do this kind of thing.

Except that no matter how good a single element is, it's not enough if the rest of the game alternates between dumb and annoying. Due to things like a shared health bar for both routes, bad jumping puzzles, and a camera that has a hard time keeping track, you'll find yourself repeating the routes—a lot. Which gets boring. Multiplayer is uninspired with a clipping problem that means two people standing next to each other can't hit each other. And graphics resemble a relic from the late 1990s. These kinds of mistakes might have been excusable in the early days of this console's development, but at the end of the PS2's life cycle, it's just not something that you can get away with. | Thierry Nguyen

YOU WIN! The "what you do as one character affects the other character" mechanic
PUT IT BACK! That mechanic is buried in an *MGS* knockoff made in the '90s

SCORE 2|5





FOUR-MAN ARMY

Assuming four people manage to pick up *Rogue Trooper,* they'll be able to get together for the online co-op games, a set of special missions created for four-player teams. They're a great substitute for the overplayed deathmatch.

PUB. Eidos DEV. Rebellion ESRB T MSRP $39.99

ROGUE TROOPER

TOMB OF THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER

Rogue Trooper crept up from behind and sucker punched me in the gut. I had to play through it twice just to make sure I hadn't been knocked stupid. Who are these unknown British code-slingers at Rebellion, and how did they make this game without anyone noticing? It's either a miracle or a tragedy, for as cool as it is when a great game materializes from the ether, sleeper hits like *Rogue Trooper* ultimately languish in the libraries of a few in-the-know gaming freaks. Consider yourself in the know.

Based on an equally obscure British comic book by the same name, *Rogue Trooper* is a gun-heavy action game played from behind its central character, a blue-skinned clone in an army of genetically perfected killers. I won't bother with the story details, because frankly, I don't find the story worth repeating. But the dark, yet colorful, character art and atmospheric locales surrounding the narrative are more than enough to suck you in.

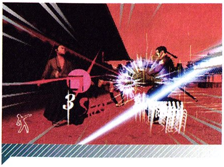
Halo designer Jaime Griesemer famously quipped, "In *Halo*, there were maybe 30 seconds of fun that happened over and over and over and over again." *Rogue* seems to subscribe to that philosophy, giving you an assortment of deadly toys and then setting you loose on a battlefield to play out the same scenario a hundred different ways. You might snipe from afar, get in close with a shotgun, or take a more creative route by laying a field of land mines before using a holographic projection of yourself to lure your foes into the trap. *Rogue* plays intuitively, with the kind of chiseled-control feel you expect from the best of the best. Most everything in the game's environments can be climbed on or used for cover, which lends combat a playful back and forth. It makes for the kind of open-endedness that allows you to play a game over and over again.

Rogue's greatest asset is its variety, which constantly refreshes the experience before that "new game" smell wears off. Just when you might tire of standard combat, along come stealth opportunities, vehicle-based missions, and monster gun emplacements. There's never a dull moment.... | *Robert Ashley*

VERDICT This year's first official sleeper hit: a great-looking sure bet for the action set.

SCORE 4|5

Disney
SQUARE ENIX
New allies



SAMURAI CHAMPLOO: SIDETRACKED

HIP-HOP. YOU MUST STOP-STOP

PUB. Namco Bandai DEV. Grasshopper
ESRB T MSRP $49.99

Samurai Champloo: Sidetracked **has one** of the coolest combat concepts I've seen in a long time. The gist of it is that available fighting moves are tied directly to hip-hop tracks. Different songs offer different combos, and before each level, you equip your tracks much like you would a weapon.

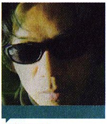
It's a great idea, and it's very fitting for a game derived from the anime series *Samurai Champloo*, which is a weird postmodern fusion of samurai warriors and Japanese hip-hop that's set in Japan's Edo period. You can play as Mugen, Jin, or a game-exclusive third character. The story line is billed as a missing episode from the show, which is OK for fans of *Samurai Champloo* but somewhat tedious for those who don't know the series, particularly since there are frequently multiple cut-scenes between the action sequences. The music itself offers good ambiance, and while the game's graphics are far from cutting-edge, their style is cool enough to mostly overcome that problem. Plus, you get to battle a band of ninja monkeys—complete with an Afro-wearing "leader monkey"—which is awesome.

What's not so awesome is that actual combat is pretty sucky. The combos themselves are simplistic. Opponents are also pretty repetitive and basic; much more challenging is battling often-unresponsive controls and an unwieldy camera. The damage system is also unpredictable—sometimes enemy blows will do nothing, while other similar swipes knock off half your health.

It's no surprise that *Samurai Champloo* was made by the same team behind the visually compelling but gameplay-challenged *Killer 7*. *Samurai Champloo* is *not* a good game, but the premise is cool enough that you might—and I stress the word "might"—want to rent it just to check things out. And then cross your fingers that another developer will see the idea and borrow it for their own game (I'm looking at you, *Def Jam 3* team). | Dana Jongewaard

VERDICT Sample the concept, but scratch the rest.

SCORE 2|5

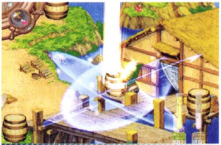


ORIGIN

Samurai Champloo is the creation of Shinchiro Watanabe, the same man who came up with the much-loved anime series *Cowboy Bebop*. The word Champloo is derived from the Okinawan word champuru, which means "to mix" or "to blend."

10 WORDS

What the heck is an Azoth, you ask? Well, in the game, the Azoth is the name of a sword central to the plot. The real definition of the word is actually mercury, considered in alchemy to be the primary source of all metals.



ATELIER IRIS 2: THE AZOTH OF DESTINY

FIRE BURN AND CAULDRON BUBBLE

PUB. NIS America DEV. Gust
ESRB E10+ MSRP $49.99

NIS has found a good niche for itself on these shores: old-school RPGs featuring hand-drawn art and loads of loads of side quests, Japanese humor, and scantily clad women. The kind of stuff the American anime fan eats right up. Most of NIS' titles have also been very intimidating for the average gamer. Layer upon layer of game mechanics are piled on top of one another until you almost have too much to think about.

Atelier Iris 2 goes in a much more user-friendly direction, and that's a good thing. This traditional RPG does feature a lot of unique little twists but generally feels like something we all would have played on the PS1 back in the day. And that's its greatest strength as well as its greatest weakness.

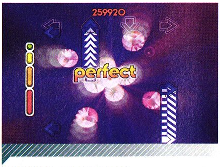
While you won't have to run the level-up treadmill so much in *AI2*, you will have to do a whole bunch of backtracking and fetch-questing to the point of ridiculousness. Nothing is worse than fighting your way across an entire continent only to have to go all the way back because...I don't know, your party needs a bit of wood they can only find in this one specific spot in the desert or something. Stuff like that happens in *Atelier Iris 2* all the time.

The boring battle system and frequent random encounters make the whole process even more frustrating. While the basic battle mechanics feel like they should offer something akin to what you'd find in *Grandia III*, really almost every fight—including boss encounters—requires you to tap the X button repeatedly and perhaps throw in the odd healing spell or potion. Riveting.

Atelier Iris 2 isn't a horrible game by any stretch of the imagination, but it just feels way too by the numbers, especially for a product coming from NIS. It's mediocre. And since the more recent RPG choices on the PlayStation 2 include quality stuff like *Dragon Quest VIII*, *Shadow Hearts*, and *Grandia III*, it's tough to justify spending any time with a mediocre game when you could be playing something great. | Greg Sewart

VERDICT A mediocre game that should go at the bottom of your RPGs-to-play list.

SCORE 2.5|5



DANCE FACTORY

DO THE RANDOM, BORING, UGLY HUSTLE

PUB. Codemasters DEV. Codemasters
ESRB E MSRP $39.99

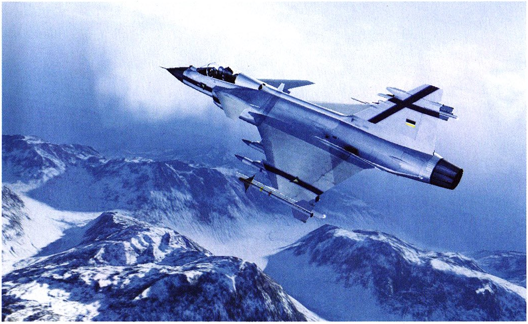
It's one of the holy grails of gaming, up there with working virtual reality and a decent *Batman* game: We who have obsessively shaken maracas, stomped on dance pads, and strummed guitar controllers have long wished for a rhythm game unbound by the musical tastes (or low licensing budget) of its makers, a game that creates rhythmic patterns on the fly for whatever music you feed it. Finally, after years of being forced to dance to the beat of cheap cover songs and badly aged techno, the makers of *Dance Factory* have given us what we want. And it kinda sucks.

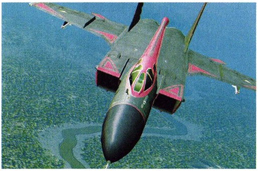
Dance Factory, on a gameplay level, is a carbon copy of *Dance Dance Revolution*. Streams of arrows pour down the screen, which you beat-match on a standard *DDR* dance pad. Only, with this version, you can swap out the game disc with your own music CDs. After a long disc-reading break (I've seen the process take two minutes for a single track), the game plays your chosen song with arrows that follow the tempo, if not the beat, of the music. Though the timing usually works well, the arrow patterns are random, creating ridiculously uncoordinated steps on the dance pad. Worse, the game sucks the life out of any party anthem, monotonously droning on the downbeat with little variation, never acknowledging changes in the intensity or feel of the music. The Record mode, which lets you record your own routines, could've been the solution. Unfortunately, without any way to edit your work, you're stuck with whatever you can stomp out on a single run-through, mistakes and all.

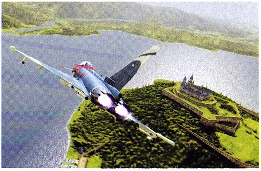
I still think a music-customizable rhythm game could be amazing, but *Dance Factory* falls short of the ideal. | Robert Ashley

VERDICT *Dance Factory* proves that when it comes to rhythm games, memorable patterns matter more than good music.

SCORE 1.5|5







PUB. Namco Bandai **DEV.** Namco **ESRB** T **MSRP** $39.99

ACE COMBAT ZERO: THE BELKAN WAR

WAR IS HELL...ISHLY BORING

I have to admit that I'm not really thrilled by the direction recent *Ace Combat* games have taken. Ever since *Ace Combat 04* hit just the right balance of story, variety, challenge, and pure fun, the series has been leaning ever more steadily in a story-heavy direction. *Zero* takes this trend to a ridiculous extreme, at the expense of much of the innovative gameplay that made the series great.

How ridiculous? Three words: live-action video. Oh yeah, baby—welcome to 1996! Badly dubbed, poorly translated, laughably green-screened video bits attempt to tell an overly dramatic story of one pilot's role in the war that set the stage for the previous two games...and I couldn't care less.

I can deal with a lousy story, though, provided the gameplay holds up. But *Zero* is the first *Ace Combat* in a long time that feels really phoned in. Where's the mission variety that made the previous games such classics? Even *Ace 3*—though way too easy and all but lacking in story—boasts a really interesting set of missions; there's even one in space!

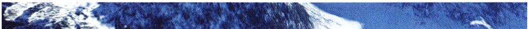
But *Zero* feels utterly monotonous: Shoot planes. Shoot SAMs. Repeat. One mission sends you into the interior of a vast dam to take out control panels (after the requisite trench run), but even that lacks the spark of creativity found in similar missions in previous games. I can't help but feel that the development energy was directed toward the overproduced cutscenes, rather than toward mission design, where it belongs. And while I'm ranting, will someone please tell me why these games haven't gone online yet? It's 2006, people!

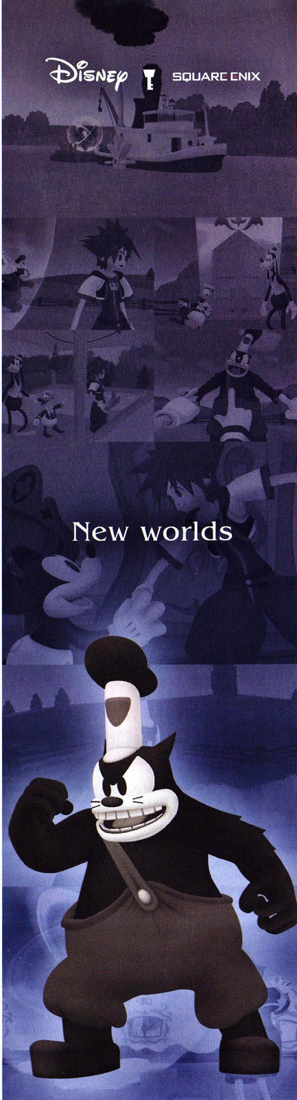
In spite of the lackluster design, *Zero* is, if nothing else, another addition to the barren landscape of flight games on the PS2. And the missions, though definitely uninspired, are at least entertaining, thanks to the series' always top-notch controls. And graphically, the game is the best of the series—especially when it comes to landscape features.

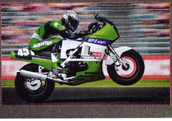
But all that doesn't mean much if the basic game puts you to sleep. And that's pretty much what happened to me. | *Joe Rybicki*

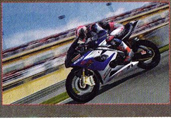
VERDICT *Zero* is the least inspired *Ace Combat* in nearly a decade.

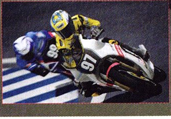
SCORE 3|5

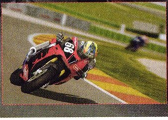












PUB. Sony DEV. Polyphony Digital ESRB E MSRP $39.99

TOURIST TROPHY

TURISMO ON TWO WHEELS?

There are two ways to look at this game. If you're a crotch-rocket aficionado looking for the ultimate in bike physics and handling, *Tourist Trophy* was pretty much made for you. The feel of each bike is about as perfect as you can expect for a home console, requiring you to memorize each curve and braking point on every track to get the most out of your machine. Enter a turn wrong, and you can expect to lose a couple of seconds, at best—or lose control and crash, at worst.

But if you're looking for a pure racing game rather than just a driving simulator, you could do better than *Tourist Trophy*. Sure, it's got loads of tracks, a fantastic collection of bikes to choose from, and the aforementioned great physics. But unless you're a god on two wheels, chances are you'll find the game way too unforgiving to be that much fun. When the slightest off-course excursion leads to a wreck—or even worse, an inexplicable disqualification—the frustration factor rises rather quickly.

The biggest problem, however, is the small number of bikes that can be on the course at any one time.

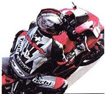
Four.

It's really hard to have an exciting race when there only three other riders out there. These tracks (mostly recycled from *Gran Turismo 4*, though there are some new variations) felt lonely enough when you could only have six cars on them. With only four (even smaller) vehicles, they feel downright desolate. When you consider that you could be playing a game of, say, *MotoGP* instead, which features large fields of bikes in each race, it's hard to justify spending a lot of time with *Tourist Trophy*.

Tourist Trophy started its life as a sort of side project for Polyphony Digital, and it was driven by some members who are hardcore bike racing fanatics. The problem is, that's exactly what the game feels like—some sort of half-baked mission pack for *GT4*. The groundwork is laid for a fantastic series here, if the team has more money and resources for a sequel…and if it's on more powerful hardware, like the PlayStation 3. | *Greg Sewart*

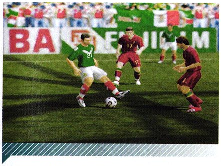
VERDICT A great bike-racing tech demo, but it lacks the excitement needed to make it a great racing game.

SCORE 3|5



THE NEW DRIVER

Tourist Trophy may come from *Gran Turismo* granddaddy Kazunori Yamauchi's studio, Polyphony Digital, but the real driving force behind this game is creative director Takamasa Shichisawa. Shichisawa is a former professional motorcycle rider, and he's actually the rider pictured on the bike on the cover of the game box.



2006 FIFA WORLD CUP

STRIKING THE BALANCE BETWEEN AUTHENTICITY AND FUN

PUB. Electronic Arts DEV. EA Canada
ESRB E MSRP $29.99

You'll find some major depth in *World Cup*—way more than just the 32 teams vying for the cup. In fact, you can take any of the 127 national teams from every corner of the world through the extensive qualifying matches and all the way to the finals in Berlin. The realism, something at which EA Sports games have always excelled, hits a new level of excellence this year. The stadiums and their ambience blow you away, the player models leave zero doubt when it comes to identifying who's on the pitch, and the uniforms offer detail previously unseen in a soccer sim.

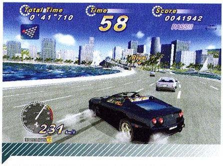
One of the most noticeable control changes in *World Cup* is the goal-shot system, which takes some getting accustomed to. How much pressure you put on the shot button establishes the angle of the strike, while the skill level of the shooter determines accuracy. The new shot system greatly differentiates stars from the rest of the players; for example, French superstar midfielder Zinedine Zidane can make it happen in the box better than some guy you've never heard of.

The one thing that's always bugged me about soccer videogames is penalty kicks (especially in the *World Cup* final), but EA's done a nice job of finally making this aspect of the game more realistic. The new system features a moving indicator; the longer you wait to boot the ball, the more difficult it becomes to accurately hit the target. If you're defending the penalty kick, making the keeper jump around and wave his arms legitimately distracts the shot taker. And the defensive AI makes for low-scoring matches, so you'll be seeing a lot of penalty kicks.

EA also introduces other new content with *World Cup*, including the Global Challenge. This mode serves as a history lesson, allowing you to re-create classic moments from past World Cups. Even though *FIFA 06* came out just six months ago, for fans of the beautiful game, *2006 FIFA World Cup* is a must-have. | *Patrick Mauro*

VERDICT No, it's not *Winning Eleven*, but this soccer sim stands on its own.

SCORE 4 | 5



OUTRUN 2006: COAST 2 COAST

IF IT LOOKS LIKE OUTRUN AND PLAYS LIKE OUTRUN...

PUB. Sega DEV. Sumo Digital
ESRB E MSRP $29.99

The original *OutRun* is the source of many fond memories for those who used to venture into the arcades in the days when arcades still made money and were frequented by a good number of people. So it will come as absolutely no surprise that the gameplay in *OutRun 2006: Coast 2 Coast* relies heavily on nostalgia (like the inclusion of tracks from *OutRun2*) to pull you through the experience. Ultimately, the glossy (and occasionally impressive) new coat doesn't really mask the fact that this is some vintage racing.

Nope, you won't find turbo or in-depth driving mechanics here—just some flat-out speed racing with some drifting thrown in. Sure, it takes a little bit of skill to drift effectively since you have to avoid traffic while doing so, but otherwise, there isn't much to it. And, unlike the addition of new driving techniques in previous titles, here you've just got the same drifting and slipstreaming that they've given you before.

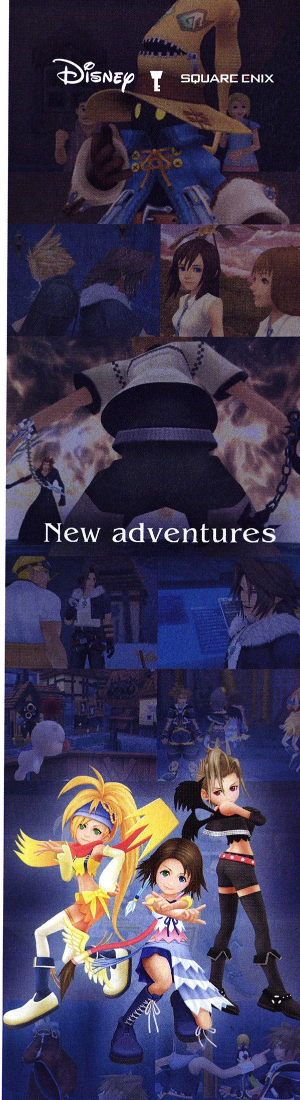
On top of that, while it's fun to unlock the other Ferraris (you get 12 of them to play with), the other modes in the game don't add much in the way of variety. They involve different objectives, such as smashing into other cars or drifting as much as possible to impress your girlfriend, but overall they're pretty shallow.

Also, *Coast 2 Coast*'s soundtrack is just god-awful. Yes, those fans of old-school *OutRun* will be happy that the original tracks are included, but the remixed tracks—particularly those with vocals—are nothing but cheese.

OutRun 2006 is not a bad game, but in a world where arcade racers have evolved to the quality of the *Burnout* series, it just feels kind of antiquated. | *Giancarlo Varanini*

PROS Visually impressive in some parts, simple gameplay good for short bursts
CONS Gameplay gets old pretty quick, soundtrack needs some work

SCORE 2.5 | 5



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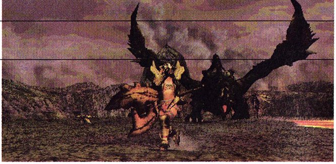
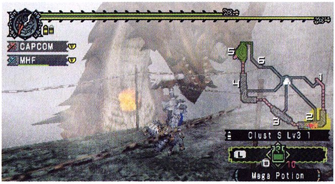
Violence





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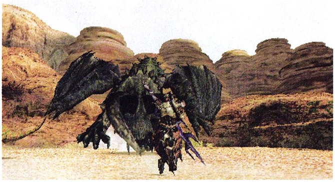


PUB. Capcom DEV. Capcom ESRB T MSRP $39.99

MONSTER HUNTER FREEDOM

THE REAL MONSTER IS THE LEARNING CURVE

Monster Hunter Freedom is the kind of game that you'll hate if you only play for a couple of hours but will love if you play more than that.

As an action-RPG, *Freedom* has it all: nifty character creation, progressive leveling up (as you work toward becoming a hunter), a plethora of weapon and armor upgrades, dozens upon dozens of objects to buy and sell, and seemingly hundreds of single and multiplayer (four-player, ad hoc) quests that take you into lush environments—the likes of which are rarely seen on any game system, let alone on the PSP. And then there's all the side stuff, like the Kokoto Farm where you can harvest plants, mine for needed ores, scrub for mushrooms and herbs, and go fishing.

Sound like a lot? It is! And therein lies the problem with *Freedom*. There's so much to do that it's easy to be overwhelmed and confused when you start out. Your first couple of hours are going to be spent figuring out exactly whatever it is you should be doing. Go ahead—run around the village, check everything out, talk to people, even try to pry that friggin' sword out of the rock (behind your house). Do not ignore that little fella to the right of the Gathering Hall entrance. He's the village chief, and he'll get you started on some easy quests. He's also the way the game's tutorial works: He'll provide much-needed hints and tips once you're on your mission.

I may just have saved you an hour; had I been clear on these simple points from the very outset, it may not have taken me 18 real-time hours to become a hunter. This could-be-friendlier intro will likely be a factor in whether you stop in frustration or wait for the payoff and keep playing.

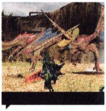
Because once you do understand what you have to do—and I urge you to stay with it—you'll be sucked in. Your various hunting and gathering quests will quickly become your focus. You'll be obsessed with bagging the great jungle kut-ku or finding a rare blue mushroom. Hunting the monsters brings its own high learning curve, but like most of the game, when you do figure it out, you're good to go.

Freedom's hunting quests in particular range from "medium" to "massively difficult." It's important to learn which weapons are best for which creatures, and to know what all your support equipment can do. Combat is tricky, because the monsters are fast—and you're not. Most of the weapons and character movements are so cumbersome that it often feels like the monsters are fighting in real time, but you're in turn-based combat. *Freedom*'s camera, while never perfect, is particularly confusing when a fight gets chaotic.

The devil may indeed be in the details, but if you dive into *Freedom* with the mind-set of "knowing is half the battle," you'll be rewarded with a game that will provide you with—no lie—over 100 hours of truly compelling gameplay. Happy hunting. | Tom Byron

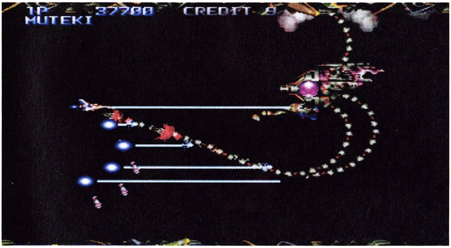
VERDICT The thrill of the hunt is bogged down a bit by details. Be patient—there's a truly wonderful game here for the bagging.

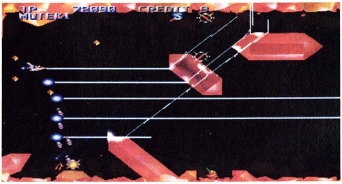
SCORE 4.5



MONSTER MULTIPLAYER

Monster Hunter Freedom's ad hoc cooperative four-player mode (for hunts; two players only for treasure quests) is silky smooth and fun, but it also feels a bit unnecessary and forced, especially since the quests don't seem designed for more than one player. And even with a couple of hunters by my side, that gol-dang kut-ku was still hell to bring down.





PUB. Konami DEV. Konami ESRB E MSRP $39.99

GRADIUS COLLECTION

SHOOT!

Gradius Collection **should** be rated M—not because it's violent (unless you think a pixelated spaceship shooting pixelated versions of those crazy heads from Easter Island qualifies as violent) or because it has nudity. It doesn't have either of those. Really, the reason it should have that rating stems from the amount of profanity that will spew from your mouth and the possible injuries incurred from slamming your PSP into a brick wall.

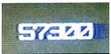
You might've guessed by now that nearly every single game in *Gradius Collection* is hard—really hard. If you've never been exposed to these kinds of old-school shooters, *Gradius Collection* is not a good place to start—unless you want to torture yourself. For the hardcore shooter fan, it's not much better. The problem is that the PSP controls feel pretty sluggish; the D-pad is more problematic than the analog nub, but the nub is less precise than the D-pad. It's even more difficult to navigate through a level with dozens of little bullets flying everywhere when the controls don't feel as precise as they should be.

Another problem—that really doesn't have to do with the game itself—is the PSP screen. It can be pretty hard to see some enemies and bullets because of the PSP screen's notorious problem with dark colors and the fact that they tend to blur a little more than brighter colors. That you can stretch the game to fill the PSP screen tends to exaggerate the issue, but the screen feels really, really small if you're trying to play these games in their normal aspect ratio.

Still, these are the *Gradius* games, and they remain shining examples of shooter design and old-school difficulty. However, when that difficulty is unintentionally ramped up because of flaws in the PSP design or because of what seem to be shoddy controls, then the whole experience takes a pretty drastic dive. But fans of shooters like *Gradius* and its sequels may enjoy that anyway, since they're usually gluttons for punishment when it comes to their favorite genre. | Giancarlo Varanini

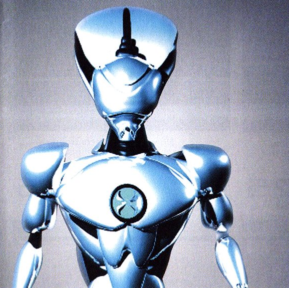
PROS The ports are well done in terms of visuals and music
CONS The controls and the PSP screen make for some problems

SCORE 2.5 | 5



TRIVIA FOR NERDS

Some arcade versions of Konami games, including *Gradius*, had a default high score of 57,300. In Japanese, the digits of 573 are written in kana as "Ko-Na-Mi," a play on the publisher's name.



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by Rick O'Connor

DRAGON BALL Z: SHIN BUDOKAI

DIMPS COMES THROUGH AGAIN

| PUB Atari DEV. Dimps
ESRB T MSRP $39.99

Note for Atari to stick on their refrigerator door: "Get Dimps to develop all the *Dragon Ball Z* games." As Atari continues to soak the market with its endless parade of *DBZ* games, it's important to remember that, for the most part, these games are not very good—and it doesn't help that Atari shuffles the license from developer to developer, which compromises quality and consistency.

But it's Dimps that has emerged as an exception: When it comes to proper *DBZ* gamemaking, they seem to be the shizznit. Their *Budokai* entries for the PS2 sufficiently prove this point; fortunately for us all, Atari landed on Dimps again for *Dragon Ball Z: Shin Budokai* for the PSP.

While not particularly deep, *Shin Budokai* is a surprisingly good 3D fighting game and compares favorably to its 2D brethren, *Street Fighter Alpha 3 Max* and *Darkstalkers Chronicle: The Chaos Tower,* especially in terms of fighting mechanics. *Shin Budokai* is fast and intense, and the fighting all happens in real time—not cuts to, say, the crucial Kamehamehas. The control set is intuitive—sure, thumb-mashing is still a big part of the mix, but combos and special powers seem well thought-out, with nifty *DBZ* standards like teleportation, rushes, and transformations. The modes of play are been-there fare, anchored by the Dragon Road story mode, with arcade, time-attack, survival, and training modes filling in the rest.

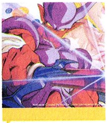
Graphically, *Shin Budokai* is bright, colorful, and smooth in its cel-shaded wrappings. Fans will find the 18 characters and varied environments every bit *DBZ*-authentic.

Ah, if only *Shin Budokai* had online play. True, the ad hoc multiplayer (for two) works well, but, c'mon! Just imagine an infrastructure mode where you can jump on and beat the Kamehame out of anyone at any time.

Well, save it for the next *DBZ*. There will be more. For now, consider *Shin Budokai* among the best of the lot. | *Tom Byron*

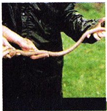
KAMEHAMEHUZZAH! Intense and fun 3D fighting
KAMEHAMEHUH? Plays it too safe with bare-bones gameplay; some missed multiplayer opportunities

SCORE 3.5 | 5



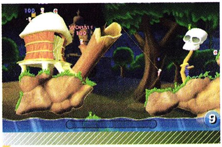
REBIRTH OF FUSION

The Dragon Road story line in *Shin Budokai* is based on the *DBZ* film *Rebirth of Fusion* (aka *Fusion Reborn*). In the plot, a demon is careless with the Cleansing Machine (not to be confused with a washing machine) and is transformed into the monster Janemba. Goku and Vegeta go all-out fusion to stop the megademon.



THE MORE YOU KNOW

The giant Gippsland earthworm, native to Australia, can grow up to 10 feet long. The average size is nearly three feet. That is a big damn worm.



WORMS: OPEN WARFARE

BETTER THAN EATING DIRT

| PUB THQ DEV. Team17
ESRB E10+ MSRP $39.99

The *Worms* franchise has always earned a warm place in my heart for its oddball weapons, its quirky humor, and its simple, yet challenging, strategy gameplay. But this particular iteration is feeling a bit hollow.

Forsaking the 3D build-and-conquer gameplay of *Worms Forts, Open Warfare* returns to the utterly old-school, 2D, hand-drawn artwork of the original games. And that's both good and bad. On one hand, the 3D iterations of the series have been just too complex to be as addictive as the original 2D style. But on the other hand, after the building mechanic of *Forts*, the simple aim-and-shoot model of *Open Warfare* seems perhaps a bit *too* simple.

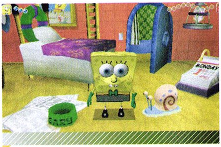
Don't get me wrong; it's still plenty addictive. Learning the ins and outs of the different weapons and gadgets is entertaining, and finding new and ever more sadistic ways of dispatching your annelid opponents is as satisfying as it's always been. But after a few rounds, you start to realize that there really isn't that much *game* here. The single-player mode consists of 20 challenges that are virtually identical; the only change is either that your enemies get more health or that you get more of them. Beyond that, you can fire up random matches or set up specific game types—but without any kind of long-term goal, these just feel empty.

The *Worms* franchise really shines in multiplayer, and that *should* help alleviate the feeling of emptiness. But surprisingly, *Open Warfare* supports only local play via ad hoc wireless and "pass the PSP." Considering that *Worms* was one of the first franchises on PC to include online play, this is an unbelievable disappointment.

In the end, if you've got a fellow strategy fan sitting within a 30-meter radius of you, then you can have a fine old time with *Open Warfare*. But if not, you're unlikely to get more than a rental's worth of gameplay out of it. | *Joe Rybicki*

VERDICT It's a stripped-down version of the familiar *Worms* formula—sans the familiar online multiplayer.

SCORE 3 | 5



SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS: THE YELLOW AVENGER

SOMEONE NEEDS TO AVENGE IT

| PUB THQ DEV. Tantalus
ESRB E MSRP $39.99

I would argue that the appeal of *SpongeBob SquarePants* is built largely around the characters' voices. Story lines that are largely conventional get taken to a new level of humor with the show's over-the-top, goofy voice acting. Which is why the absence of any voices—not even the singer of the theme song that plays at the beginning—is a real letdown.

The story line is portrayed by chunks of written text instead of by voices, which is problematic for young fans that might want to play *SpongeBob* but aren't terribly literate yet. And from the game design, it quickly becomes apparent that The Yellow Avenger is geared toward young players. Quests tend to be largely of the fetching variety, the levels are pretty small and not that expansive, and you run into the exact same obstacles every time.

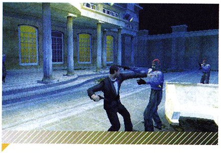
It's a sprawled-out tutorial—often, I'd do an action, and then five minutes later, I'd stumble across a person who would tell me about it and how to do it. In fact, I got a lot of missions that were instantly solved because I'd already performed the task that I was being told to complete.

So, fine: It's a simple game. And other than the whole reading issue, I'd say, "Great—get it for kids, not for adults." However, the controls are pretty unresponsive. I died countless times from accidentally missing jumps over the possessed residents of Bikini Bottom. The aiming mechanic for bubble shooting is really awkward, which makes it hard to hit things correctly without multiple shots, which makes it tough in the boss battles.

My favorite part of the game was the loading screen, which is an extreme close-up of *SpongeBob*'s face pressed up against the glass as his eyes twitch back and forth. That made me smile more than once, but other than that, my overall consensus is: "ehhhhh." | *Dana Jongewaard*

VERDICT No voice acting, control reactions softer than the sponge himself, uninspired gameplay

SCORE 2 | 5



JAMES BOND 007: FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE

NEVER SAY NEVER

PUB. EA Games DEV. EA Redwood Shores
ESRB T MSRP $39.99

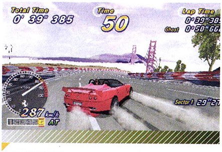
There's a belief that when a company ports a game from the PS2 to the PSP, they're required to add new content. Hence, the tendency for PSP versions of PS2 titles to feature things like additional skins, guns, cars, levels, and so on. *From Russia With Love* adds more unlockable multiplayer characters and hidden challenges; even with these additions, though, it actually has less content than its console cousin.

For those of you who skipped the console version, *FRWL* is a third-person Bond actioner à la *Everything or Nothing*. The game manages to expand the movie's few memorable action sequences into solid levels, and adds new action sequences, like those of Bond jetpacking around Big Ben and shooting the heck out of a jet. Rounding out the package is the odd experience of hearing an old Sean Connery aping a 40-plus-years-younger version of himself.

While it wasn't as good as *EON*, *FRWL* was at least a decent game—on a home console. First thing you notice about the PSP version? Say it with me: one analog nub. Which means that you repeatedly use the L button to autoaim at any nearby enemy and you use Square and Circle to rotate the camera from side to side. On top of that, tapping Square turns on "Bond Focus," an enhanced aiming mode where you move the reticule with the analog nub. This is a somewhat serviceable setup, yet it's crippled by an obscenely slow camera, which makes targeting bad dudes pretty darn annoying. Add to that how the PSP version just has the on-foot levels; the car chases and speedboat runs of the console version were hacked away to get Bond onto the PSP. *FRWL*'s transformation from decent PS2 game to mediocre PSP port reminds me of how *Never Say Never Again* was a mediocre remake (with old Sean Connery) of decent Bond flick *Thunderball* (which had younger Sean Connery). | *Thierry Nguyen*

THUNDERBALL A decent third-person shooter, the chance to shove Sean Connery into your pocket
NEVER SAY NEVER AGAIN No vehicles, simplified controls, crap camera

SCORE 2.5/5



OUTRUN 2006: COAST 2 COAST

ONE FOR THE ROAD

PUB. Sega DEV. Sumo Digital
ESRB E MSRP $29.99

As with its PS2 counterpart (see the review on page 97), much of what makes *OutRun 2006: Coast 2 Coast* for the PSP initially appealing is its name and the history that name invokes. Fortunately for fans of the *OutRun* titles, most of the gameplay mechanics have carried over to the latest game as well, so you won't see much of the way in driving mechanics outside of drifting and some occasional ramming of other cars.

There's not a whole lot to it, but that's precisely what makes this game better suited for a handheld than a console. *Coast 2 Coast* was originally designed for the arcades—as such, it's best played in short bursts, making it very fortuitous that most of the game modes force you to play in short chunks.

Not so fortuitous, however, is the fact that these modes don't offer all that much variety, and by the time you complete several of the missions in them, you might wish there were a little more to the package. After all, there's only so much powersliding you can do to impress the girlfriend who only wants you for your driving skills. Plus, once you've been through most of the environments, the drive to continue playing the game drops significantly. And after you've saved up enough points to unlock the Ferrari of your dreams, the drive diminishes even further. Some of the hiccups in the framerate can also be a little distracting, especially for a game that's supposed to be all about speed.

Otherwise, however, the PSP version of *Coast 2 Coast* can be just as visually impressive as the PS2 version. And though the game is better suited for the PSP than the PS2, know that the price is some irritating technical shortfalls. The hardcore arcade-style gameplay may be a huge turn-off for some, but if you've always like the *Outrun* games—even back in the day—then, surely, you won't be disappointed with the face-lift. | *Giancarlo Varanini*

PROS The gameplay is better suited for handhelds...
CONS ...but it gets old quickly, and the PS2 version costs the same.

SCORE 3/5

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[Colin Farrell, Q'Orianka Kilcher]

THE NEW WORLD

A NEW FANTASTIC POINT OF VIEW

by John Scalzi

I'm not entirely sure why director Terrence Malick is allowed to make films in Hollywood. This isn't because, like, say, Uwe Boll, he's too bad for Hollywood; indeed, it's quite the opposite. Malick makes movies that send film buffs into rapturous praise, struggling to find new and interesting ways to describe his film vocabulary to each other. But these films also don't make any money. Malick's a great filmmaker, but he's also intensely unprofitable.

The New World, his latest, offers evidence of this. It reimagines the famous meeting between English explorer John Smith (Colin Farrell) and Indian princess Pocahontas (the age-appropriate Q'Orianka Kilcher). But rather than reheat their presumed love story in a Disney vein or turn the encounter into the start of some wild action-adventure romp, Malick offers a take that's both realistic (in how it portrays both of the cultures the leads come from) and impressionistic (in how the characters relate to each other). The movie takes its time not to establish a plot—the narrative isn't exactly focused—but rather to set the time and place in which these people lived, the consequences the environment had on them, and how they related to each other.

Add this to Malick's preternatural cinematic eye (*The New World* is gorgeous), and you have a film that's simply one of the most arresting of the last year—and, alas, one of the most uncommercial (it grossed a mere $12 million in theaters). So we're back to how it is that Malick's allowed to make movies in Hollywood at all. I think it's because, every once in a while, movie execs like to remind themselves that the power of cinema is in more than the box office. It's a nice delusion, anyway.

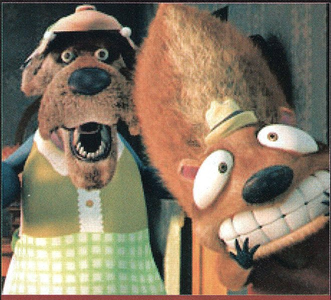
SCORE 5|5

BIG MOMMA'S HOUSE 2

Martin Lawrence, Nia Long

In this unfathomable sequel, Martin Lawrence pulls a Mrs. Doubtfire in order to get the goods on a technotraitor. But what this film's really about is showing all the ways your life could be better spent than by watching it. For example, you could liberally douse your corneas with butane, set them aflame, and run merrily through your backyard, screaming all the way. Yes, yes, that would be a vastly better use of your time than this crap.

SCORE 1|5



HOODWINKED

Glenn Close, Patrick Warburton

Videogame developers used to suggest that, one day, their games would be indistinguishable in quality from computer-generated movie animation. They were right—not because their graphics have gotten so good, but because, with *Hoodwinked*, cinematic computer animation has become so crappy. *Hoodwinked* looks and feels like an 80-minute in-game machinima made by Hanna-Barbera. Aside from the sub-*Red vs. Blue* animation quality, this film's story has a cute conceit—Little Red Riding Hood meets *Rashomon*—but it's also got a lame script that falls back on the tired animated-movie trick of getting its laughs from in-joke cultural references to other films. I mean, come on: the big, bad Wolf wearing a Lakers jersey like Chevy Chase did in *Fletch*? Oy. Time to cut *that* crap right out.

SCORE 2|5

RUMOR HAS IT...

Jennifer Aniston, Kevin Costner

This film assumes that you've seen *The Graduate* (which was a smart assumption 15 years ago—not so much today) because it works on the conceit that the characters in the film are the real-life versions of the fictional characters of that movie, and Jennifer Aniston is their kid...maybe. All this makes me remember is the fake pitch session in *The Player* where Buck Henry posits a *Graduate* sequel...and now, here it is. Nothing is sacred anymore.

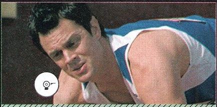
SCORE 2.5|5

THE PRODUCERS

Nathan Lane, Matthew Broderick

This film was puzzlingly unsuccessful, considering that it's based on both one of the greatest film comedies of all time and one of the most successful Broadway musicals of the last two decades—and the fact that, as latter-day film musicals go, this is pretty good, with Lane and Broderick hamming it up perfectly and a lot of fun folks on tap to fill in the gaps. Who can say? I liked it. If you like musicals, you will, too.

SCORE 4|5



THE RINGER

Johnny Knoxville, Brian Cox

Any film that features Johnny Knoxville pretending to be developmentally challenged is just offering itself up to be mercilessly mocked...and yet, I find this film kind of sweet. Knoxville's a normal guy who pretends to be disabled in order to compete in the Special Olympics. But the film treats the Special Olympians with something resembling respect, and the plot, while nothing special, moves along agreeably.

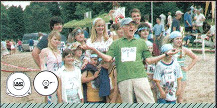
SCORE 3|5

WHEN A STRANGER CALLS

Camilla Belle, Tommy Flanagan

You know what? In real life, when a stranger calls, he probably wants to sell you something—usually, a magazine subscription or some add-on to your credit card that you'll never use ("You're protected if you lose a toe scuba diving!"). Or maybe he just wants to tell you about Jeebus. Whatever he wants to talk about, listening to him drone out his telemarketing script is more suspenseful and more entertaining than this witless piece of junk.

SCORE 1|5

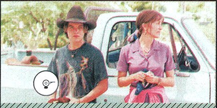


CHEAPER BY THE DOZEN 2

Steve Martin, Bonnie Hunt

This is a perfectly acceptable piece of family filmmaking that you'll forget 10 seconds later. What I'll remember it for is the realization that, somewhere along the way—when I wasn't paying attention—Hilary Duff went from cute, ubiquitous teen to vaguely skankalicious too-thin Hollywood thing. I propose we form the Muffin Brigade, which would intervene with warm, filling pastries when starlets get to the "I think I see your skeleton" stage. Who's with me?

SCORE 3|5



TRANSAMERICA

Felicity Huffman, Elizabeth Peña

Felicity Huffman got an Oscar nomination for playing a man who's on his way to becoming a woman but finds out she has a son right before she makes the final cut (as it were) and decides to go meet him. Calling Oprah! What I most admire about Huffman is that she's one (rare) actress who didn't fall into a suicidal depression when someone figured she looked a bit like a man in drag. She's good, and so is the movie.

SCORE 4|5

DVD RELEASE

May 2
Hoodwinked
May 9
Big Momma's House 2
The New World
Rumor Has It
May 16
The Producers
The Ringer
When a Stranger Calls
May 23
Cheaper by the Dozen 2
Transamerica

UMD RELEASE

May 2
Bad Boyz II
May 9
X-Men
X-2: X-Men United
May 16
When a Stranger Calls
May 23
Cheaper by the Dozen 2

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NETWORK

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REPLAY

REVVING UP THE PLAYSTATION WAYBACK MACHINE

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GETTING DOWN

MARC ECKO ON WHAT WENT WRONG WITH GETTING UP

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The six most powerfully stress-reducing videogames for your PS2.

113 BEST OF OPM
All the 5-out-of-5 games in this magazine's history.

113 PS1-DERLAND
How playing PS1 games on your PSP will change, well, lots of things.

STRESS RELIEF

SIX WAYS TO UNWIND

The old fogies out there have long argued that games just aren't as challenging as they once were. We tend to agree, though the odd title will still leave you crying like a little girl with the impossible feats it requires.

But honestly, what's wrong with games that are easy to pick up and play? They're supposed to be fun. They're supposed to relieve stress. And along that line of thinking, we present some of the best stress-relieving games you'll ever find. | *Greg Sewart*

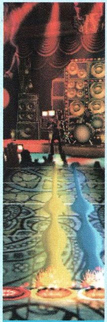
01

HOT SHOTS GOLF: OPEN TEE

Highly competitive sports games can be a bit stressful, especially if your friends are all better than you. But the *Hot Shots Golf* franchise balances it all out with some of the most user-friendly controls you'll ever find in a links game.

Hot Shots on the PSP is one of the best portable games, too. Despite the somewhat stingy collection of courses, there's so much to unlock that you'll find yourself happy to return to the same tee over and over and over again. Plus, the pretty graphics and happy, bouncy music and sound effects are sure to soothe your uptight soul.

And you can still get a bit of competition going, too, with wireless multiplayer.



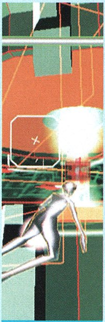
02

GUITAR HERO

You might not get the groupies or the trendy drug habit out of the deal, but a copy of *Guitar Hero* and the spiffy guitar controller still makes you feel like a rock star. Nothing is more relaxing than jamming out to tunes from the likes of Joan Jett, Queen, David Bowie, or the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

Feel your stress melt away as you rock out to the classics, picturing yourself in front of thousands of adoring fans jumping up and down like idiots, women tossing their bras at you. Does life get any better?

One caveat: "Bark at the Moon" on the hardest difficulty can ruin your chill. Unless you have, like, eight fingers on one hand, trying this song is about as relaxing as swimming in a shark tank while wearing chum underwear.



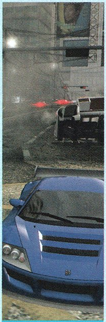
03

REZ

Music soothes the savage beast, which must be why our stress-reliever list has a few tune-based titles on it. This obscure Sega classic mixes trippy graphics with cathartic shooting action and smooth beats that you actually control based on the actions of your onscreen avatar.

So, basically, you get something pretty to look at, the stress-relieving fun of shooting anything that moves, and bumpin' tunes that'll melt your worries away. Or something.

The only stressful part of the experience might be actually finding the game at your local game shop. Check eBay to find it—at press time, there were copies listed for as low as $10.



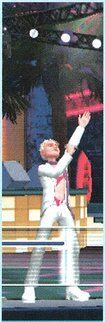
04

BURNOUT REVENGE

Ever get cut off on the drive home from work? Wish you could just run that idiot off the road without fear of reprisal? Welcome to the world of *Burnout*, where it's not only legal for you to act upon your road rage—it's required.

With *Burnout Revenge*, developer Criterion Studios has perfected the art of vehicular destruction. Your goal is not just to beat your opponents, but to destroy them. And traffic? Hey, as long as it's going the same direction and doesn't outweigh you by a couple of tons, feel free to knock it out of the way. Nothing better after rush hour.

Oh, and the portable *Burnout Legends* is a good one, too. Just be sure to park your real car before whipping out the PSP to take out your frustrations on unsuspecting motorists.

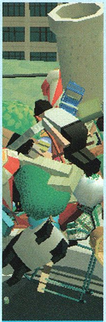


05

KARAOKE REVOLUTION PARTY

This is but one part of a bigger equation. For some people, belting out a few songs when they get home from work is a great way to relieve stress. And we're all for that. However, add a group of like-minded friends, some good food and libations, and watch the whole room relax.

There's even more fun to be had with a second microphone or Sony's EyeToy camera. Then you've got the ability to sing a duet and see just how silly you look right up on your big screen. It's also a good way to catch the people sitting behind you making faces at you when they think you're not looking.



06

WE LOVE KATAMARI

Katamari is relaxing mostly because it's so bizarre and such a simple game to get into. All you have to do is roll up everything you see. If it's bigger than you, avoid it; if it's smaller than you, collect it.

Katamari is one of those great pick-up-and-play gems that just happens to contain a good sense of humor and some beautiful, stylized graphics. Even non-gamers can play like pros—kind of—right off the bat.

Of course, perfectionists might consider this to be one of the more stressful games out there. While the game is supereasy to learn and have fun with, it's actually pretty difficult to master. Oh, well; the extra challenge should keep the old-timers from whining about games being a tad too easy, anyway.

CONTROLLER SNAPPERS

On the other end of the spectrum, we have a few choice titles here that tend to induce more stress than they relieve.

ICO

Sony's art-house hit is a great game, no doubt. But constantly having to rescue the useless Princess Yorda—and watching her just ignore your commands—can be downright infuriating.

STUNTMAN

The movie-inspired driving game from *Driver* developer Reflections tasks you to complete superhuman feats of driving with little to no margin for error. One of the hardest games around.

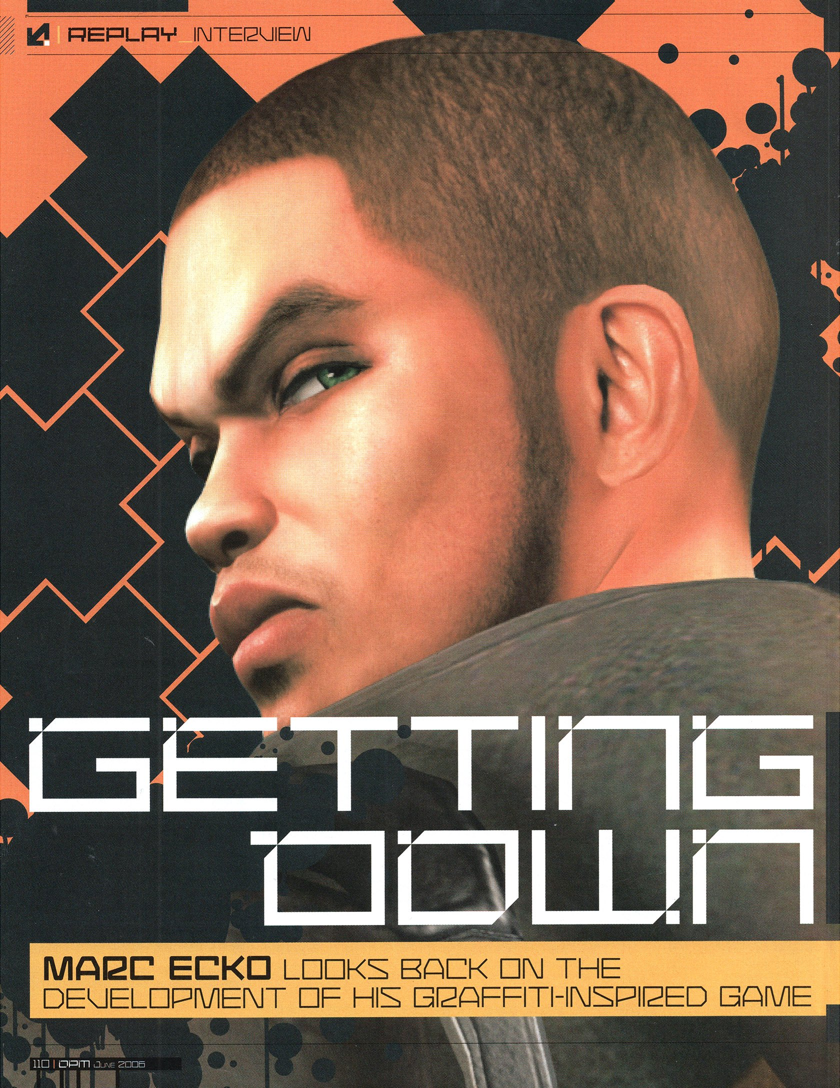
PRES
TRES
VP
AHOLE

THE GUY GAME

This embarrassing excuse for Topheavy Studios' execs to put those spring-break trips on their expense reports has one of the most irritating game mechanics ever invented: having to guess what stupid thing the onscreen airhead is going to say next. Guess right, you see skin; guess wrong, you wonder why you ever spent any money on this crud.

SILENT HILL SERIES

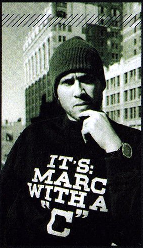
Silent Hill is a stressful experience by design. This series is one of the most frightening, tension-filled franchises ever to hit a home videogame console. The *Fatal Frame* series isn't far behind it, either. Fire up either one to spike your stress level.



GETTING DOWN

MARC ECKO LOOKS BACK ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF HIS GRAFFITI-INSPIRED GAME

Though reviews of *Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure* haven't been overwhelmingly positive, that hasn't deterred fashion-entrepreneur-turned-game-designer Marc Ecko. Quite the opposite, in fact—Ecko spoke with *OPM* about what he learned from the experience of working on the game and how he plans to apply the lessons he's learned to any possible future videogame projects.


IT'S: MARC WITH A "C"

RÉSUMÉ

Marc Ecko founded his Ecko clothing company in 1993. His empire has since grown to include other properties such as magazines and—obviously—game studios.

OPM Is there anything you would've done differently in the development of *Getting Up*?

MARK ECKO Oh, there are tons of things that you'd like to have done differently, or things that were inherently flawed in the process of developing our first game. And you'd love to be able to rewind time.

But, ultimately, everything I've learned professionally, and in life, is that you can't do that. So you just try to learn from it and be [better] versed from that education in your next go-round. Being that, well, when I started the process four years ago, it was at a time when the consoles were money-printing machines for a lot of publishers.

I was trying to do something that was very abstract and certainly not invited by larger publishers. You fast-forward to today with the disruption of a new console, the business being flat for major publishers, EA cutting price points, announcing that they're no longer going to be booking only Hollywood licenses because it's just too expensive a model. I think we were ahead of our time, and I think our process, our way, is ultimately going to be the future of how games are going to end up being developed, where publishers, developers, and the IT managers actually can earn something. Because the current model hasn't really been working.

OPM Do you think companies are going to end up taking more risks?

ME I think you're going to see a lot more creative disruption. And I know, certainly for us, we learned a tremendous amount that I wouldn't have otherwise learned if I didn't experience it the way I experienced it. Early on in the process, going around to Atari-owned developers whose core competencies weren't action-adventure and having them try to convince me they could do it even though they'd never done it, to ultimately having one of three developers, one being The Collective, that had a team available and were actually willing, at a time where most developers didn't want to talk to us. I think we did a good job, so I'm proud of it.

OPM Were you ever worried that, when the game finally came out, reviewers really wouldn't get it?

ME I knew that the general, traditional gaming press would be very polarized in their reviews. I knew, just based on how different this was and the timing of it. There's a law of diminishing returns this late in the console cycle, where the expectations are based on what's happening on high-end PC games or next gen. The editorial community is looking for that. And the code was still being built on the PS2, and what's driving the business is still what's happening on the PS2. Also, the only other precedent in this genre, arguably, was *Jet Set Radio*. So I knew we were going to have this weird comparative thing going on—that there'd be people that would get it and people that wouldn't get it. It's no different than movies or any other games that have predated [*Getting Up*]. So ultimately, the most important thing is brand awareness and that retailers understand what the product's about. It's really been our core focus. I've seen better returns on investments working directly with the retailers around the country—and seeing the difference in how that informs sales—than even with traditional game marketing for this title. So that's interesting.

OPM The fact that the special edition of *Getting Up* was so good got a lot of attention from both retailers and average consumers.

ME Yeah. Well, we wanted to do something different. You still go around the Net, and there are lots of ill-informed people out there on websites or message boards—[the game] wasn't even relevant to them. They couldn't see past the fact that this is so different, and the first few hours of gameplay were different than what they had experienced, or their expectations were based on what the PS2 could or couldn't do—it didn't allow them to see the value in the [special edition]. But that said, I know I've traveled the country, I've done signings, and it's great to go see a couple hundred people lined up in front of you carrying the special edition and geeking out on it. So the most important thing now, for me, is to maintain the expectations of that community of consumers who bought it and actually liked it, and to make sure we do the right thing by the brand for the future.

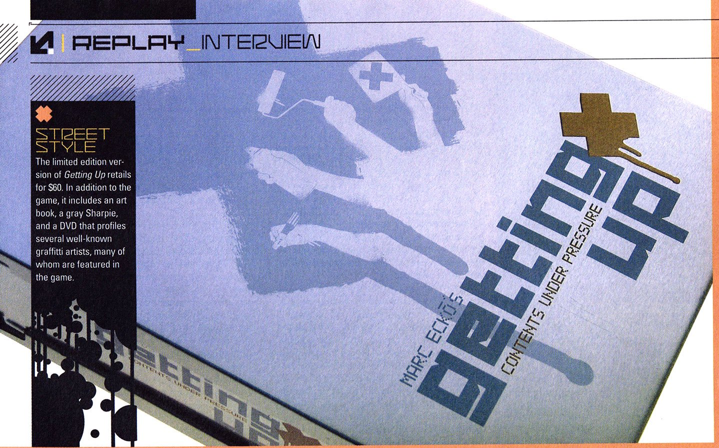
OPM If you could go back, you would try to reeducate people?

ME I'd say that in our marketing message, we couldn't get people past the simple execution. The lowest-common-denominator person understands graffiti as—merely thinks of it as—the act of just simply applying the art to the wall, rather than thinking about how they're going to navigate the environment, evade conflict, and so on. And I think that, whenever they would get into these navigation puzzles, they'd be thinking *Prince of Persia* rather than Trane [the main character of *Getting Up*]. But then, graffiti artists move around the world—maybe not in as acrobatic a way as Trane, obviously, because we had to enhance the experience. It's like a jungle gym. And if you've seen it done, you can appreciate that. In our marketing message, we couldn't get past the "it's a graffiti game" and what people just think of as "graffiti." [We were trying to express] the extreme sport of graffiti, the action and the physicality of graffiti, so I think that's something, probably, that if we could restrategize, we probably would. And it certainly will inform things that we do going forward, even in the short term.

> "THERE'D BE PEOPLE THAT WOULD GET IT AND PEOPLE THAT WOULDN'T."

OPM The special edition did a great job of explaining what the culture was all about.

ME Right. I think so, too. But yeah, it has a lot to do with the fact that it's just not understood, because graffiti's something that's a subculture. I thought the hardcore [gaming audience] would appreciate that. You can see



STREET STYLE

The limited edition version of *Getting Up* retails for $60. In addition to the game, it includes an art book, a gray Sharpie, and a DVD that profiles several well-known graffiti artists, many of whom are featured in the game.

the polarization—from 8.7 on GameSpot to then getting bashed by *EGM*. It's two different perspectives, both from very critical reviewers, but one coming with no predisposition rather than trying to get into the act of a graffiti artist, and seeing past some of the rough edges that the game definitely has.

| OPM Looking specifically at the game, what do you see those rough edges being?

| ME I think the thing that's the most broken for me, that didn't happen from the original game design, is the "Contents Under Pressure" thing: giving the player the sincere feeling of "I've got to get the f*** out of here!" The designs to make that happen—the clocks, the time-based puzzles—didn't quite function in the same way as if it were happening from the NPC AI. If the AI were behaving properly, it would make the stealth more purposeful than some of the disruptions that are supposed to happen while navigating. What would've made that experience more exciting is if there were a lot more chases or getaway moments. But the AI never behaved that way. And it was something that I knew, six months out, just wasn't going to happen, based on scope and resources. So those are things that the [The Collective's engine] just, inherently, wasn't built for. Those were the learning curve things, and we try to make up for that as much as possible. Then there are things like some of the navigation puzzles and places are confusing. And I think that has a lot to do with that dynamic between publisher and developer.

The word is "milestones"; I'm not going to get paid unless I complete my milestone—and assets [were] being built before certain fundamentals [were] defined. There were levels that were built before core navigation mechanics were even scripted. And then you end up having to jury-rig them in and use no considerations for how it's going to affect the camera—and then you're just working backward at that point. There are a couple of spots on the game like that.

There are a lot of things that got cut; probably a third of the game's on the cutting room floor. And I think that's something that also, certainly, will be a relic of the PS2, Xbox days: Developers will look back and wax nostalgically on, "Remember when we used to try to build 40-hour games?" You know? And they'll be content building 10-hour games. There's definitely that wide-eyed ambition that had the team, resourcewise, working on things that ended up not even being consumed, that the consumer doesn't necessarily even see. The scope was just bigger—it's like your eyes are bigger than your stomach. Ten pounds of s*** in a five-pound bag. I think a lot of the development community is guilty: Rather than being overly ambitious on what the core mechanics are, there's this overambition to try to create something that's huge in actual logistics and physical hours. And I don't see that as a trend going forward; I think you're gonna get those long hours of gameplay experience on more community-based games, like in the spirit of what happens on Xbox Live or on high-end PC games like *World of WarCraft*. Those games where you can roleplay and geek out and pace yourself, those will be the games you tend to get the long hours from. But I think the consoles are going to move toward shorter, faster-to-market titles. I even insisted that the game come with the layers unlocked. Because it's a fact: The average consumer only completes 30 percent of the titles they buy. You know, so you got to feel bad for the poor [guy] who worked on the 20th level of the 11th load for a year and a half.

| OPM Are all of these things things that you'll potentially keep in mind for the next project? Are you going to look at something in the future and say, "OK, here's what I'm going to do, because these things didn't work for *Getting Up*"?

| ME Oh, of course. Of course. You get your education from experience. Anyone who knows me knows that this wasn't a vanity play. I'm in business to do business. I did it with my magazine—I'm excited that we're about to ship our fourth anniversary issue. I remember writing the business plan five years ago, and I know all the bumps and bruises we learned in the first 18 months. Same thing applies to apparel. The same thing will apply to gaming. And I knew it was more important for me to actually get in. It was like I knew that I wouldn't have as much access, I wouldn't be given as much access to the engine—not literally the engine, but the keys—because I was an outsider and there was the suspicion of what I was or wasn't capable of bringing to the table. When I say "I," I mean "my staff," the kind who worked with both the publisher and the developer in this case. When I think of the *Getting Up* brand for the future, I think you can't think of that brand without thinking of community. And the community aspect is something that will define the brand going forward, for sure.

But overall, you know, I'm proud of what we delivered and what we did, despite the bumps. That's part of being in the business. We could be critical of that and cynical of that, but I came in swinging, and I kicked the door down. There's a barrier to enter in this business—as you know, being an observer and someone who's writing about it and paying attention to it. I'm really, really proud of the guys and girls that worked on it; I would never try to dilute the amount of time and effort that was put in by those soldiers on the front line. |

> "I'M REALLY, REALLY PROUD OF THE GUYS AND GIRLS THAT WORKED ON IT."

GETTING UP MMO

While there's been absolutely nothing confirmed, much of the speculation on the next game under the *Getting Up* name points toward a massively multiplayer online game of some sort with rival artists battling it out in a massive urban environment. It sounds like a really cool idea, but it may be a while before we learn anything definite about it.

PlayStation
ISSUE 105

PLAY IT NOW!

Check out Ecko's first gaming endeavor for yourself with the exclusive PlayStation 2 demo located on this month's disc.

OPM'S BEST

Looking for the best of the best? Look no further. Below you'll find every game that was ever given a 5 out of 5 rating in *OPM*.

GAME	PUBLISHER	ISSUE
PSP		
Field Commander	Sony Online Entertainment	104
PS2		
Burnout 3: Takedown	EA Games	85
Burnout Revenge	EA Games	98
Colin McRae Rally 3	Codemasters	68
Dark Cloud 2	Sony CEA	66
Devil May Cry	Capcom	50
Escape From Monkey Island	LucasArts	46
ESPN NBA Basketball	Sega Sports	75
F1 2001	EA Sports	52
F1 Challenge '99-'02	EA Sports	71
FIFA Soccer 2003	EA Sports	63
FIFA Soccer 2004	EA Sports	75
FIFA Soccer 2005	EA Sports	86
Final Fantasy X	Square EA	53
Final Fantasy X-2	Square Enix	75
Final Fantasy XI	Sony CEA	78
Freedom Fighters	EA Games	73
God of War	Sony CEA	92
Gran Turismo 3: A-spec	Sony CEA	46
Gran Turismo 4	Sony CEA	91
Grand Theft Auto III	Rockstar	52
Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas	Rockstar	87
Grand Theft Auto: Vice City	Rockstar	63
Half-Life	Sierra	51
High Heat Major League Baseball 2004	3DO	67
Ico	Sony CEA	50
Jak and Daxter: The Precursor Legacy	Sony CEA	52
Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King	EA Games	75
Madden NFL 2003	EA Sports	60
Madden NFL 2004	EA Sports	72
Medal of Honor: Frontline	EA Games	58
Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty	Konami	51
Metal Gear Solid 2: Substance	Konami	67
Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater	Konami	88
Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistence	Konami	103
Midnight Club II	Rockstar	67
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NASCAR Thunder 2004	EA Sports	73
NBA 2K2	Sega Sports	53
NBA 2K3	Sega Sports	63
NBA Street	EA Sports Big	47
NBA Street Vol. 2	EA Sports Big	68
NCAA Football 2003	EA Sports	60
NCAA Football 2004	EA Sports	71
Need for Speed: Hot Pursuit 2	EA Games	62
Need for Speed Underground 2	EA Games	87
NHL 2K3	Sega Sports	64
Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time	Ubisoft	75
Ratchet & Clank	Sony CEA	63
Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando	Sony CEA	75
Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal	Sony CEA	87
Rayman 2 Revolution	Ubisoft	41
Red Faction	THQ	46
Resident Evil 4	Capcom	99
Sly 2: Band of Thieves	Sony CEA	86
Sly Cooper and the Thievius Raccoonus	Sony CEA	62
SOCOM II: U.S. Navy SEALs	Sony CEA	75
SOCOM 3: U.S. Navy SEALs	Sony CEA	99
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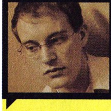
SCORE 5|5

PS1-DERLAND

PS1...TO GO?



BY JEREMY PARISH

When he's not trying to reclaim his vanished youth with obsolete games, Jeremy works as 1UP.com's features editor and charming mascot. Check out his blog at toastyfrog.1UP.com.

Sony recently announced a handful of upcoming PSP features to make the machine just a little bit more of a must-have. The camera will probably amount to little more than a novelty, and the GPS function probably won't even come to America (it's geared toward Japanese users and their confusing urban tangles of unnamed streets). But games? *That's* what a game system is all about. And in just a few months, your PSP will double as a portable PS1, potentially increasing its software library by about, oh, 5,000 percent.

Although the details are still practically nonexistent, the mere prospect is enough to bring joy to our little retro hearts. Admittedly, I can't imagine that Sony will make loading PS1 games onto your memory stick as simple as ripping and transferring music files. After all, where's the profit in that? Far more likely is a download service similar to what Nintendo will be offering for Revolution. Maybe the fee will be imposed per download; maybe it'll be subscription based. But either way, you can be certain that we'll be paying for our PS1 privileges...and that only select titles will be available.

Of course, this brings up an important question: What games will actually be worth playing on the PSP? Not every game that made its way to PlayStation was a classic. There's probably someone out there who wants to play *Aquanaut's Holiday* on the bus, but it ain't me. And then there's the button configuration issue. It might be possible, somehow, to play games that make use of every button on the PS1 controller (such as *Metal Gear Solid*), but not without a few covert, under-the-breath cusses.

> IN A FEW MONTHS, YOUR PSP WILL DOUBLE AS A PS1.

Perhaps even more important is the question of which games will actually *work* as portable experiences. If the PSP has proven anything, it's that straight ports of console software simply don't work well on the go. I like *Vagrant Story* and *Tomb Raider* just as much as the next dude (possibly more!), but it's a loooong way between save points. Not to mention that true 3D gaming can be a real strain on the eyes on that little 4-inch screen. *Daxter* is great because it was designed specifically for the PSP; *Spyro the Dragon* probably won't work quite as well.

Lightweight games with frequent break points and simple interfaces—think *Klonoa*—will work best on the PSP. 2D platformers are always a treat on the DS and the GBA, so it stands to reason that they'd be just as enjoyable on the PSP. Does the prospect of a portable *Symphony of the Night* give you shivers of joy? Because it *should.*

RPGs seem like a no-brainer, too, especially considering how many of them have already been ported to the system as legitimate releases in Japan. *Persona, Chrono Cross, Suikoden, Tales of Destiny*...it sounds like a chance to fall in love all over again. The mere possibility of playing the real *Final Fantasy Tactics* on the go (not that boring GBA version) is enough to make me seriously consider quitting my job so I can power-level full-time.

Emulation is certainly nothing new on the PSP, but it's nice to see a little official acknowledgment of the system's ability to breathe new life into old favorites. As long as Sony's portable PS1 support lives up to its potential, the PSP has officially increased in awesomeness. By like 5,000 percent, maybe. ∎

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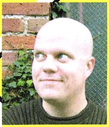

JOE RYBICKI once instructed The Avatar to slaughter an entire village of innocents in *Ultima VII*. To his credit, they totally had it coming. Have your own stories of undersensationalized gaming violence? Write 'em up and send 'em to opm@ziffdavis.com.

IN MY DAY...

MORE OF THE OL' ULTRAVIOLENCE

Last month, I touched on the enormous (and heated—and probably eternal) debate about the significance of violence in videogames. It's not an easy argument to resolve; on one side, you've got gamers and gamemakers defending their hobbies and livelihoods. On the other side, you've got a group of concerned citizens honestly believing that they're protecting the innocent from nefarious forces.

You can probably guess which side I come down on. I know—from longtime, extensive, personal experience—that videogames do not turn otherwise conscientious, reasonably well-adjusted individuals into slavering, murderous social deviants. It just doesn't happen. If it did, then you, me, and just about everyone we know would be in jail.

Furthermore, we can be reasonably assured that the vast majority of the slavering, murderous social deviants of history had very little exposure to videogames. Linear time's a bitch, baby.

So why all the hubbub? It's pretty simple, really: Outsiders look at the, uh, *ethical freedom* offered by advancing gaming technology and it scares the living crap out of them. Because, yes, some of the things we can do in games would be genuinely evil were they done in the real world. They watch us stealing cars or running over pedestrians or pulling off a totally sweet head shot on a moving target, and they think, "Oh, dearie, gracious me! What if *I* were that poor, unsuspecting pedestrian? What if that were *my* car?"

They worry that we will confuse games with reality because *they* confuse games with reality.

These finger-wagging pundits may be hip enough to know that games exist, but they're not nearly hip enough to have ever played one. So it shouldn't surprise us that games seem like reality to them. They don't understand that players of first-person shooters are no more likely to pick up a shotgun in real life than players of *Monopoly* are to liquidate their assets and start building hotels.

They're right about one thing, though. There is a game that, to all appearances, seems to be every bit as dangerous as they claim. There's frequent, documented evidence of players (and even spectators!) committing real-world crimes. Players routinely inflict real, physical—often vicious—injuries on their opponents in typical play. There were 23 documented deaths associated with this game in 2001 alone.

But in spite of all this evidence, this game is not only tolerated in this country, but actually *celebrated*. Young people are encouraged to play it—high schools even hold weekly competitions! On school property! And those who do it professionally are paid, on average, almost $1 million a year. You've probably even played it yourself.

It's called football.

And why isn't anyone concerned about the likelihood of kids raised on football going out and randomly chasing, tackling, or stiff-arming innocent bystanders on the street? Because it's *just a game*.

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